

textSize : default : medium : large

**Note from Martin**



It's always been my contention that you don't have to look far to find heroes, leaders and role models. There are great people in every school, every town and every community. Jonathan Willcocks, one of the young soccer players I used to coach, has drawn on his own experience and sense of adventure to create a unique company, **Pinnacle Pursuits**, which for the past 8 years has been changing lives by choreographing challenges and experiences to fit the needs of his clients. As Jonathan notes, "Whether we're organizing a corporate team-building program, a youth leadership challenge, a wilderness retreat or a unique adventure based event, you can be certain of the expertise of our team and of our commitment to quality, integrity and possibility." Jonathan and Pinnacle Pursuits will now be added to the list of speakers and services that you can access through Speakwell Speakers.



### **Difficult Beginnings** *by Jonathan Willcocks*

My early life experiences were not unlike the troubled and delinquent young men I subsequently came to lead



at the Porteau Camp. I've seen many a profile of young offenders that resembled my own. I grew up in England where I was considered a 'problem kid' who didn't fit in. I was teased a lot, got into fights, acted out and moved to several different schools in my first 4 years of grade school. I had loving parents but there were marital difficulties, which resulted in a separation and a decision that I should

be sent to live with my grandparents and relatives in Canada, while my younger brother and sister would stay in England and live with my mum. It was hard not to feel like the odd one out. However, the Canadian experience worked for me, I enjoyed school more in Canada than in England and invested a lot of energy into soccer, where I learned that passion, perseverance and practice paid off in terms of performance and recognition.

My Irish grandfather provided me with what might be called 'tough love' today. He was strict and believed in structure and stability, but at the same time was loving and supportive. When I became frustrated with his discipline and expectations he would quietly reach out and touch my heart and say "Courage in the heart my son". It was not easy for a boy to see, but my 'Granda' gave me the consistency and confidence I needed to deal with the hand life had dealt me. In the middle of the word 'confidence' is 'fide' meaning faith and my 'Granda's' faith in me enabled me to believe in myself and my own abilities.



In some ways I was like a refugee getting a chance in a new country, and like many immigrants I embraced the opportunities that came my way. I loved the access to outdoor recreation in Canada, and I liked the classless society in which hard work paid off in school and in the workplace.

Holidays were important to me because I went back to England to spend time with my parents. Outdoor experiences were a feature of many of our holidays, which took us to Wales, Scotland and Ireland camping, hiking, fishing and caving. One pivotal trip occurred when I was 15 when my Dad took me on a 3 week Outward Bound trip to the Outer Hebrides in Northern Scotland. We had beached our sea-going landing craft, set up our base camp and it was time to focus on physical skills assessment on day two. We were given a test and I had to run over to the nearby Loch Na Cleavag to do my swim and kayak test. We all took turns running over the wet green grass and through the gray misty countryside alone and running back. It was a long run over 2 hills, through the pouring rain, in bare feet, wearing just my swimming trunks. I remember the sheep staring at me, the rain numbing my red skin, the wind chill, and trying to avoid the bits of barbed wire and mostly trying to avoid the many piles of slimy sheep scat, and then of course jumping in the freezing cold water, only then to

return over the hills. Over those 3 weeks we received 52 cm of rain, lost 12 gale force tents to wind storms, were flooded out of our base camps twice, and we never saw blue sky. And it still made for an incredible experience!—the people, the songs, the games, the warm food, the sheep shearing with local shepherds, the mountain climbing, the wildlife, ocean expeditions, mountain rescue training, caving, crab trapping, and the overall feeling of looking back to say "We survived Cravadale '86!" I knew that I had passed a tough test in my own eyes and the eyes of my Dad and I know that somewhere in the future I'd want to share this sort of experience (in somewhat friendlier weather conditions) with others.



I returned to Canada to start grade 10 with the feeling that if I could handle the Hebrides at their worst nothing could stop me. It was in this grade that I started doing very well at school, worked 2 jobs, payed room and board, and played for several highly competitive soccer teams. When I graduated grade 12, I was the President of the Student Council, I won the Merit Cup for Leadership and Community Contribution, and was awarded 3 scholarships for university entrance. That year I had also been elected to represent the province of British Columbia on a 6 day trip to Ottawa to learn about Canadian politics and where I was recognized in Ottawa as a "Special Citizen of Canada". Responsibility and leadership was to become an over-riding theme for my life. Lists like this sound a bit like a job application but I think they're more of a reflection of my gratitude for having the opportunity for a good education and to live life to its fullest.

These 'anchoring' memories, that revolve around embracing challenge and experiencing success in the midst of adversity, created a meaningful childhood for me. I realize that if it wasn't for these memories and experiences I would not be the adult that I am today. My adult self sees life as a positive adventure. I see adversity—physical, emotional and social—as opportunities to reflect and learn based on my experiences during childhood. "A ship is safe in harbour, but that's not what ships are for." (Anon) This quote has always given me a tremendous amount of inspiration, especially when embracing risk-taking and facing new challenges.

I believe that our approach to life is based on our ability to reflect on our lives and frame our experiences so that we can create meaningful connections from our past to our present situations. Our level of success is dependent on this approach to life, how we choose to perceive ourselves, our situations, and our faith, trust, and courage in ourselves.

In my third year of university, after 2 summers of forest fire fighting, and several seasons of playing soccer, racing mountain bikes and leading UVic's Outdoors club, I saw a small job posting that read something like "Wilderness Instructors Needed: fit young men and positive role models required for shift-work in highly intense outdoor environment working with young offenders. You are required to have a good work ethic, experience on sports teams, strong leadership abilities, and exceptional wilderness skills. Pre-requisite 80 hours volunteer work." There was something about this posting that acted like a natural magnet. I was drawn to phoning the number immediately. Within one week, I had had my interview and had already completed my 80 hours of volunteer work in this strange wilderness camp in Squamish. I worked on camp projects and completed both a mountain trip and a canoe trip. In these five volunteer days, with my group, I had done over 3500 push-ups, run over 30 miles, canoed over 20 miles, backpacked over 25 miles and wanted more!



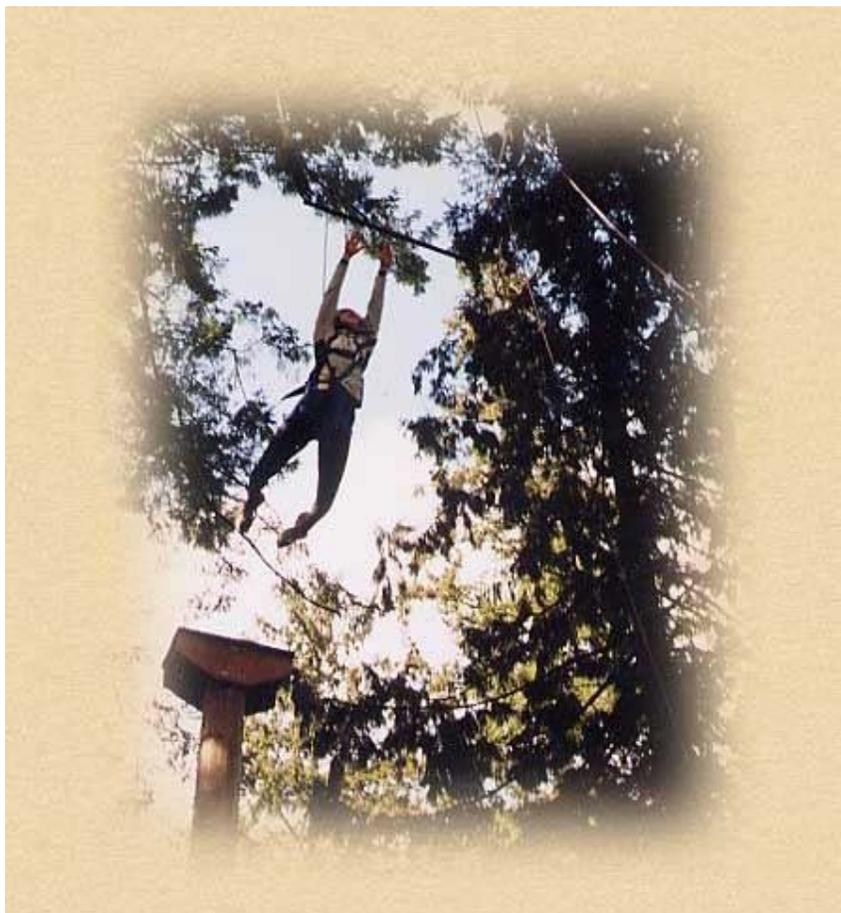
### **The Porteau Camp Experience**

Porteau Camp provided an environment to challenge and maybe provide an alternative direction for delinquent youth. Although I did not like the 'old-school' mentality of punishment and consequences, I knew these young men had wronged many people and deserved discipline and structure, which was often absent from their lives. They needed to complete this mandated probational experience to turn them around and make them more accountable and responsible people in society. My own past experiences of adversity and subsequent success matched the strategy of Porteau Camp and I was up for the challenge of the job to help them through their learning and transformational process. I wanted to positively impact others, in a kind, compassionate, and respectful way. I knew that it was this type of environment of hard work, team-work, adversity, positive learning and role-modeling that can facilitate character building and positive leadership skills. I worked full time at Porteau Camp while I finished my degree in Kinesiology and then for 4 years after I graduated. I became the youngest senior camp leader at the age of 25 and by the time I was 28, I had seen over 1200 young men graduate from the program with new skills, a newly-realized sense of confidence, and a more positive

attitude. Many had the self-belief that they could choose to be take responsibility for their lives and be successful, instead of blaming external circumstance and becoming a victim. Again it is about how one approaches life that truly makes the difference.



I also saw myself undergo many changes in my own levels of maturity and leadership. Often, when I had time to reflect, I would wonder 'who had been changed the most, the youth or I?' I remember, during our times of shared consequences or experiencing hard physical stress - whether it was doing push-ups in the pouring rain in the middle of a cold night, or backpacking up steep mountains in the heat of the summer without a rest or water-break - that I would think that we were all facing our own demons and climbing our own inner mountains. In teaching these young men to work hard, to strive for the good things in life, and to never give up, I would experience my own teachings manifest themselves more and more in my own actions and behaviors. Even though I had been learning about and living by these principles since I moved to Canada, directly teaching them reinforced the principles in my own life.



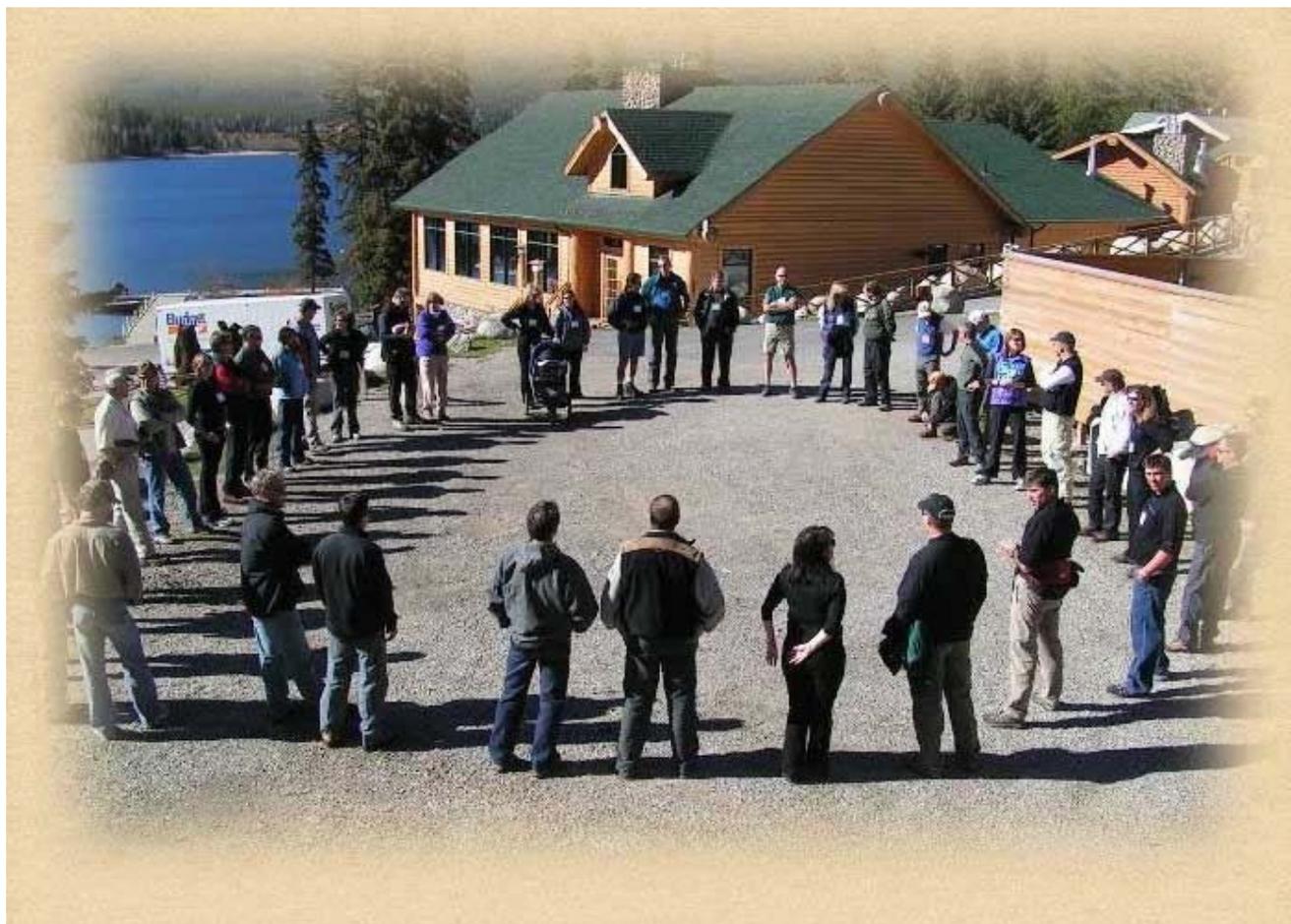
I would think how these boys lives were similar to my own at their age. In some way, I too had been mandated to live a new life when I had been sent to live in Canada. I came to honour my family's decision, knowing that facing the challenges then had now given me the compassion and understanding for these young adolescent teenagers who were also struggling.

After over 30 years in operation, Porteau Camp closed in 1999 with a changing government mandate. I was there at the last graduation at camp, and was saddened knowing that this experience of Porteau was over. I also knew that I would continue to always carry the Porteau spirit forward into my own work and as part of my values and principles of living.

In 1997 I had started my own company here in Vancouver. It was with Pinnacle Pursuits that I knew my flame would burn and through which I could continue affecting lives positively. I wanted to work with people who were not sent to me but people who wanted to challenge themselves and build courage in the face of adversity; people who wanted to have fun while they learned, and who wanted become more passionate, inspired, and stronger leaders in their own life.

Now in our 8th year of business, this is exactly what we are doing—endeavoring

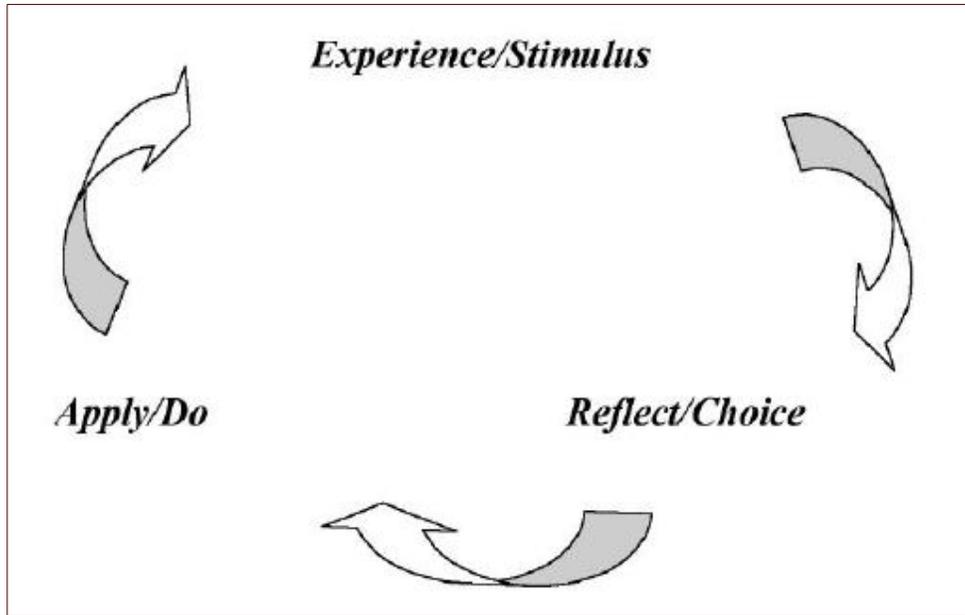
to help people to become better human beings and leaders—thousands of people worldwide each year. But now, it is with my wife Cheryl, with whom I have the pleasure of leading the company forward. Her skills, expertise, and life experiences are quite different to mine, but she is also a learning-leader and our differences paired with our common belief and vision, are what makes us such a great team. The two of us have created an incredible staff of international experts in adventure programming, team-building and leadership development.



Founded on the principles of experiential learning—learning by doing with reflection—we design workshops and programs that are action-based, challenging, inspirational and transformational. We design and frame group experiences that are meaningful and relevant to the group's real life living, learning, and working situations. By creating an environment conducive for the participants to safely experience challenge as a group, we are then able to facilitate an experience where they are able to reflect upon their insights and apply these learnings and successes back into their own situations in life. The reflection and then application are where the breakthroughs occur in the learning process and where the magic truly lies.

We have created a model that reflects this learning evolution that I call the

'Learning-Leader Cycle'. The successful learning-leader develops their ability, skills, knowledge, and wisdom through this dynamic learning process. The following is a diagram that illustrates the model where experience-reflection-application is paramount in overall leadership growth and development.



I believe that one of the factors that determines an individual's leadership potential and success is how regularly they use this model and how willing they are to intentionally create experiences that provide these learning opportunities



As I look upon my life, I am humbled as I find myself doing the same work, based on the same values and principles that affected me so deeply since childhood. I feel honoured and am moved continuously when I am invited into people's lives to help facilitate their leadership challenges, opportunities, and successes. Through our team-learning and leadership development programs, I am now creating 'anchoring' moments for others to fall back on and use to enrich their own leadership development and potential.

The next step is about continuing to explore my own limits—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and continuing to create 'anchoring moments', from which I can use to reflect upon and strengthen my own wisdom. I am exploring balance—balance between company growth and maintaining my own inner growth—so that I can stay inspired and lead effectively with meaning, purpose, and passion.

It is important for me that I continue learning through life and business challenges, and that I also share these learnings with my staff team and encourage them to share their challenges and learnings with me. Then we can create models on how we can all learn better together and share these models

with other organizations.



As a company, since we provide experiences for groups that are designed to challenge them in some way, and subsequently help them create a more effective and successful team, it is important and fitting that we continue to embrace challenges and change in our own organization—we must walk our talk. I take this responsibility very seriously, and know that by embracing life challenges wholeheartedly, with an undying positive approach, it will continue to make me a stronger person, a better leader, and that ultimately my business will flourish as it is being lead from a place of integrity.

There is an old Chinese proverb that states, "Strong timber does not grow with ease; the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees." I first read this on a plaque that hung over the hearth at Porteau Camp in the winter of 1993. It affects me to this day as I reflect on my life and continue to make sense of all the challenges and opportunities that life has to offer to be a successful learning-leader.



send a link



to this page



harry back

contents



speakwell

sally forth

