



IS IT SOMETHING IN THE POTATOES?

Substantial number of social media notables emerges from Canada's smallest province

By Laurie McBurney

The list reads like a who's who of social networking.

Jevon MacDonald, co-founder and CEO of GoInstant, sold last summer for \$70 million... Daniel Burka, co-founder of Pownce, creative director at Digg, now design partner with Google Ventures... Bonnie Stewart, educator, writer, researcher into digital identities, PhD candidate at the University of Prince Edward Island, whose social media insights have been published by Salon.com and The Guardian (U.K)... Dave Cormier, credited as the creator of the term Massive Open Online Courses

(MOOC), manager of web communication and innovation at UPEI, member of the award-winning Edtechtalk, international speaker on rhizomatics (a way of learning based on ideas) and the effective use of new technologies... Amber MacArthur, co-founder of Konnekt Digital Engagement, TV host, best-selling author of Power Friending and dubbed "Canada's top social media expert on how to build a brand" by Canadian Business Magazine... Rob Paterson, co-founder of Queen Street Commons, who "looks beneath the surface" to provide context and connections in



David Cormier, webmaster, UPEI, says Charlottetown's small size makes it easier for things to happen quickly. "Lots of people get ideas. Ideas are a dime a dozen. The problem is getting them to happen."

the social media world with his company Renewal Consulting Group Inc. and lists clients such as National Public Radio and public television stations.

It's obvious these social media notables have a lot in common—creativity, risk-taking and originality. But there's one more connection that you won't know unless you read their biographies. They all have deep roots in Canada's smallest province, either having been born and raised on Prince Edward Island or living and working there for a good portion of their adult lives. When you add up the accomplishments and measure their influence, it's obvious that P.E.I., with a provincial population of approximately 146,000, is punching well above its weight class on the social networking scene. Is it something in the water—or maybe in the potatoes?

"Small places teach an inherent understanding of networks," says Bonnie Stewart. "I do think most of us with strong ties here learn to navigate networks and make the most of the ties we have."

Jevon MacDonald agrees. "I learned about the power of relationships early and have used this to my advantage throughout my career," he says.

One of the earlier relationships MacDonald forged was with the late Martha Burka, mother of his friend, Daniel Burka. The boys were all of 15 when Ms. Burka alerted them, Daniel's twin brother, Nicholas, and a few other young friends, to the fact that local museums were looking to digitize their collections. Despite their youth, the young men thought they could do the job, and set up face-to-face meetings with the museum management.

In an article on Shopify.com, Burka was quoted as telling Sprout Up, a monthly gathering of Toronto tech entrepreneurs, "We knew museums wouldn't come to a bunch of kids, so we approached them. We asked them, 'if we write the proposals and get the funding, will you let us digitize your collections for you?'" The "kids" got the go-ahead—and the funding. At an age when most teenagers would be skateboarding or playing video games, Burka, MacDonald and friends formed a company called Whitelands Studio. Whitelands has since morphed into a world-class website development company known as silverorange based in Charlottetown. With a list of clients featuring giants like Bebo, Mozilla and ESPN, silverorange kickstarted the careers of Burka and MacDonald into the stratosphere.

"This never would have happened in Toronto," says Rob Paterson, who owns Renewal Consulting Group, Inc., and had a long-time professional partnership with MacDonald. Paterson, originally from England and a long-time P.E.I. resident, is now based in Quebec.

Friendships and business relationships can happen in big cities, of course. But, according to Paterson, the advantage of living in a small place such as P.E.I. is that you meet like-minded people in the most casual ways, such as walking

on a downtown street, at a coffee shop, or in the grocery store. And when you see and interact with people in diverse ways, not just across a desk or in an office, you get a sense of who they are and gain a level of comfort in approaching them. Familiarity like that makes it a whole lot easier for a group of teenagers to talk to museum managers.

Paterson has a personal example of how small town relationships can make business dealings simpler and more flexible. In 2005, he saw a need in Charlottetown for shared office space for a growing cadre of entrepreneurs, artisans and part-time summer residents. The concept of co-operative working spaces was fairly unique at the time—Paterson says to his knowledge, there were fewer than five in the world in 2005.

He happened to mention the idea during a semi-regular lunch with other social media entrepreneurs and aficionados. Dan James, president of silverorange, overheard and pulled up a chair. It turned out that silverorange just happened to own a downtown building that would be a perfect fit for the co-op. James was willing to take a chance on a relatively untried idea, certainly one that was unique to P.E.I., and the deal was settled with a handshake. To this day, Queen Street Commons operates successfully from the same location, and yes, silverorange is still the landlord.

Paterson says it's a lot more difficult to make these kinds of deals happen in large places, because it's harder to get to know people.

"You need to network face-to-face . . . It builds trust so then you can work very quickly," says Paterson.

The speed at which ideas can be executed is what David Cormier, webmaster at UPEI, finds special about the Island. Originally from a small town in New Brunswick, he has lived and worked in Charlottetown for several years.

"Lots of people get ideas. Ideas are a dime a dozen. The problem is in getting them to happen," he says.

When Cormier came up with the concept for "Living Archives," billed as "a partnership project helping Island students bring the past to life using the tools of the future," he picked up the phone and called the province's department of education.

"I got a call back in 10 minutes from the deputy minister. She asked, 'What are you thinking about?' I explained, and she said, 'Oh, that's interesting, you'll have to call this person and that person and see what they think and then we'll see what we can do.'" To make a long story short, Cormier and his partners put together a grant proposal within a month and got about a half-million dollars in federal funds for an educational project that involved all three Island school districts (www.livingarchives.ca).

"It was that quick. If you tried to do that anywhere else to (a) have the permission to do it



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Amber MacArthur and her brother Jeff MacArthur, co-founders of Konnekt Digital Engagement. Amber attributes her social media success to her Island roots: "(Islanders) love to talk. We love to connect. Social media allows us to do this with people all over the world."



Bonnie Stewart, a well-known educator and researcher into digital identities, says P.E.I. has a lot in common with the world wide web. "The internet, and the social media web in particular, is a commons that we need to start actively treating like the world's biggest small town."

at an institution like a university, and (b) to expect that kind of response from the government, well, you're just not going to get it," he says. "I've found that in anything I've ever tried to do here."

To Cormier's mind, professional autonomy and responsibility is another attraction of working in Charlottetown.

"It ends up being really easy to be the only person in charge of whatever it is you're doing. I don't have a committee or a group of people I have to report to. Because it's such a small place and those things are scaled down, [you] end up being able to represent in single ways. It gives you a chance to have a voice in a way that would be more difficult if you were in a group of 12 or so in a larger organization," he says.

Paterson agrees. "I think people who are interested in doing things, pulling things off are attracted to smaller communities, because there, your work stands for you. Doing good work gets you noticed."

But all work and no play makes for a dull social media entrepreneur. Some necessary components of thinking outside of the box are creative outlets and a critical mass of talented people to spark concepts and ideas.

Stewart found just those things when she returned to P.E.I. from South Korea after 15 years of exploring the world.

"When I moved back it was partly to raise my family, but also because every time I came home, I became aware of how vibrant the cultural community was here. Living in other places made me appreciate how much Charlottetown, in particular, offered for a city of 35-40,000 people," she says.

Stewart has a particular affection for the Confederation Centre of the Arts. The gray, concrete structure covers an entire city block and has the largest theatre main stage in Canada east of Montreal. While the stage has been home to world-class plays and concerts, many Island children have cut their performing teeth in dance recitals and school plays on it as well.

"This creative urban offering in this small place was, for me, one of the big draws in coming back. We wanted to be where there was a vibrant cultural community and for the size and scale of the place, it's pretty significant. So my ambition was originally directed elsewhere, but my creativity always felt like it had a home here," she says.

Cormier also cites the presence of the university, the airport and good restaurants as amenities that ensure an imaginative and innovative population.

Of course, there can be some drawbacks with a smaller population.

"There are only a few web companies that operate from Charlottetown, so you can be both physically and intellectually isolated," Burka noted in the Shopify.com interview.

However, some see that as an advantage,

encouragement to extend beyond a confined scope of experience. Stewart says growing up with a sense that there was an interesting and exciting world beyond P.E.I. pushed her to travel and broaden her understanding and knowledge, something that people who live in bigger centres may not feel the need to do.

"Some of my peers in Toronto have never left there because they never really had to," she points out.

Cormier's groundbreaking work with MOOCs and rhizomatic learning has led to collaborations with other experts throughout the world. "If you are the only people doing the thing you're doing, you have to reach out in some way. You're looking for peers and those peers are likely to be someplace else in the world. We have the opportunity to be the representative," he says.

Certainly, it seems to have worked that way for all those interviewed for this article. For example, Cormier has spoken at conferences in Sweden and India about the impact of the internet on education; Paterson crisscrossed the U.S. dialoguing about a new platform for public radio; MacArthur's opinion is sought whenever a new tech toy is released; Stewart speaks regularly at conferences about digital identity and has been featured in international media.

Cormier admits he doesn't know how to measure the impact those from the Island have had on the world of social media. Perhaps the best indication is that their home province is becoming a known entity internationally. "When I tell people I'm from P.E.I., they're not terribly surprised," he adds.

Another measure could be contained in the speaker's roster from last fall's Blissdom Canada conference. Two of the five speakers at "Canada's social media event for women" were from Prince Edward Island: Amber MacArthur and Bonnie Stewart.

Stewart's characterization of the internet as the "biggest small town in the world" played well to the sold-out crowd, and demonstrated the impact that experience with small-town, old-fashioned values can have on the new way the world does business.

"My message was this: the internet—and the social media web in particular—is a commons that we need to start actively treating like the world's biggest small town. Connections matter. As humans, we need them. And we are making and modeling them every time we talk to each other online. We are shaping the norms and etiquettes of these online environments with our own traces and approaches," she says.

Or in the simple words of a student who learned her ABCs in a two-room schoolhouse in Dunstaffnage: "I do think we Islanders have big hearts. We love to talk. We love to help. We love to connect. Social media allows us to do this with people all over the world, even though we're from a tiny little island," says Amber MacArthur. | ABM