

# Grad pursues passion for community journalism

Sometimes it pays to take risks.

Wawmeesh George Hamilton discovered that life lesson when he quit a dead-end, unsatisfying job. “It was like an epiphany,” he said. “I needed a change.”

After he quit, Hamilton went back to school to earn a degree from Vancouver Island University. Today, he’s an award-winning community newspaper journalist following his passion.

Black Press named the 44-year-old Alberni Valley News rookie reporter its best Vancouver Island-based junior reporter for 2008/09. As well, School District 70 (Port Alberni) recently honoured the paper and Hamilton for his education reporting.

“I like having my finger on the pulse of the community and writing about it,” said Hamilton. “People have a right to know what their public representatives are doing.”

Hamilton graduated from Alberni District Secondary in 1984, but had no idea what career path to follow. He moved to Vancouver when he was “wild, young and free” and worked short stints as a retail security officer and bicycle courier. Eventually, he landed a job at the Indian Friendship where he met Ernie Crey, then vice-president of the United Native Nations, an urban aboriginal advocacy agency.

He became Crey’s executive assistant. Crey became his friend and teacher.

“Ernie is a highly ethical public official in a brand of politics where frankly, that isn’t the norm,” said Hamilton. “He was media savy and I highly respected him. While working for Ernie, I dealt with a lot of media, never realizing that one day I’d work as a reporter myself.”



In 1994, Hamilton moved his family back to his hometown roots to be closer to his aging parents. It was the dawn of the BC treaty process, and Hamilton became assistant negotiator for his Port Alberni tribe, Hupacasath.

“But I grew disillusioned with the political process,” he said. “At 33, I became despondent. I didn’t know what I was doing or where I was going. I remember the day clearly – sitting at a meeting in Tofino with federal and provincial bureaucrats. It was my breaking point. I walked out, packed my bags, and went home with no idea of what I was going to do.”

Hamilton remembered his friend Ernie Crey’s comment that an uneducated population is a population easy to fool. “He stressed the value of education,” said Hamilton, “and that inspired me to go back to school.”

He upgraded his high school education, completed two years of university courses at North Island College, and enrolled at VIU in Nanaimo to complete his degree. Hamilton took several courses but an introduction to journalism class sparked his excitement.

“It fit like nothing else did,” he said. “I was hooked. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope and everything is blurry. You turn it, and everything becomes sharp and clear. That’s how I felt in the course.”

Hamilton completed more courses in journalism and Liberal Studies, which married literature, philosophy, politics, English, etc. with lively debate and discussion. “I loved Liberal Studies because you read large bodies of text, synthesize the information, analyze ideas, come up with your own thoughts and challenge others. It’s a lot like journalism.”

Armed with his Bachelor’s degree in 2006, Hamilton completed an intensive one-year journalism program at Langara College, and landed his first paying job as a community newspaper reporter in Coquitlam. He’s worked for the Alberni Valley News since December 2007.

“I’m proud of the fact that I’m one of a small handful of Aboriginal people working as a journalist in BC,” he said. “Being Aboriginal gives me a certain understanding of some subjects. I see the bigger picture, and maybe can get away with saying things other journalists and columnists can’t say.

“I like being the eyes and ears of the public. It’s my job to be a watchdog, to provide information on policies our governments’ pursue and hold them accountable. I’d like to work in the trenches another 15 years, then teach journalism at a place like VIU.”

His advice to others thinking about returning to school? “Anything worth having is hell to earn. Following your passion isn’t always easy. In my case, I was separated from my family for 14 months during journalism school. But if you want something bad enough and work hard, you can do it. Don’t let anything stop you.”

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