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150 Profiles: Eric Swanson

By Eric Swanson

As we mark the 150th anniversary of confederation, The Philanthropist is profiling Canadians from across the non-profit sector and putting a face to 150 individuals who work or volunteer in Canada's social sector.

Name: Eric Swanson

Current role in the sector: Executive Director of Generation Squeeze, a research and advocacy organization for Canadians in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

Years working and/or volunteering in the non-profit sector: 11 years.



What was your first job in the sector or a defining moment?

As I neared the end of my university degree in Calgary, a latent environmentalism kicked into high gear as I became more aware of the sheer scale and impact of Alberta's oil sands development, and the unsustainable economic model it represented. What was most shocking to me was an apparently high public tolerance for permanent loss, exemplified at the time by the province's dwindling woodland caribou herds. I cut my non-profit teeth with a short-term contract with the Alberta Wilderness

Association and have been exploring the many aspects of organizing, campaigning, and non-profit management ever since.

Describe your desk/workspace.

I rent a desk at a co-working space in Victoria. Surrounded by award-winning tech companies, communications professionals, engineers, accountants and designers I've come to realize how small the non-profit bubble can be and am glad to have a workspace that keeps me partially out of it.

What are you reading or following that has expanded your understanding of the non-profit sector?

Perhaps characteristically, my early work with non-profits was imbued with a deep perception of injustice, judgement and often, anger. Those feelings drove me on and fuelled my work. I became very attached to achieving specific results, and achieving them quickly. Since then, I've realized that I'm more effective in my non-profit work, and life generally, when I learn to let go. So I'm reading and re-reading the same old, but nonetheless profound classics: Tao Te ching, Bhagavad Gita, Old Path, White Clouds.

What do you think our sector needs to be thinking about?

Character. Like it or not, the first argument we make as individuals or as non-profits is that projected by our character. How people perceive us determines an enormous amount about our ability to influence opinions, behaviour and policy. Too many environmental and social non-profits are arguably limited by unflattering stereotypes associated with environmentalists, social activists, etc. Given the scale of change that is required on a range of issues, I've been thinking about how best to establish credible, powerful organizational characters.

Do you know someone we should profile as part of this series? Email us at philanthropistprofiles@gmail.com