

Be passionate and bold. Always keep learning.
-Satya Nadella



ACCT FEATURE

Rich Klajnscek

Within our industry, ACCT is still a very young Association. It is not too difficult to find many members who have been around since the birth of ACCT. It was about 1991 that a group of individuals consisting of representatives from ABEE, Adventure Experience, Cradlerock Outdoor Network, Project Adventure, Ropes Works and Signature Research came together and drafted a common set of standards that was released in 1993.

Rich Klajnscek was one of those representatives present for the first drafting of the ACCT standards. He contributed much of his engineering expertise to the standards. Twenty-six years later, Rich is still a part of the ACCT's Standards process, currently as chair of the Standards Development Committee. For 28 years, he has been integral to our industry in one way or another. But like all of us, his passion did not start zipping through trees, or climbing towers. Rich's story actually starts on the water.

Growing up, sailboats and sailing became the first real passion in Rich's life. He decided at a young age that he wanted to design yachts. Through his school-age years, he drew boats all the time. "I remember drawing them in my school notebooks as early as Middle School." He grew up in St. Catharines, Ontario where he learned to sail on Lake Ontario. He was a sailing instructor for a number of years in Niagara-on-the-Lake Ontario and eventually competed in the Laser class as a member of the Ontario Sailing Team.

Sailing is still endlessly interesting and exciting to Rich because *“Nothing beats the feeling of being powered by just the wind, not just on a sailboat but also on a kiteboard or windsurfer where it gets down to the basics. Compelling to Rich is that, when cruising at sea on a sailboat, one has a vivid sense of adventure because anything can happen and you are forced to rely on your wits and resourcefulness. A boat at sea is a micro-environment where you have the illusion of control over your world but know that nothing is really in your control because you are at the mercy of the wind and weather.”*



Rich went to school at Queens University for Mechanical Engineering. During summers, he had a variety of jobs ranging from teaching sailing to working in a paper mill, an electrical cable manufacturer to grinding welds on car bodies on the assembly line at Mercedes Benz in Germany. Immediately after graduating, he rode his bicycle on a 7,000-mile odyssey across Canada with another Canadian he met (at a pub) in Germany the previous summer, convinced that this was the best way to learn about their country. He eventually found himself a perfectly good engineering job with a telecommunications company in Ottawa, Ontario, but his sail-training partner convinced him to quit that job and join him at a burgeoning rickshaw business. By day Rich trained with his buddy in Lasers and by night, he got in shape and made some cash pulling Rickshaws. The Rickshaw business was fantastic and great for fitness, but winter inevitably came and that was that. He moved back to his hometown to work in the engineering department at a sailboat manufacturer for the next four years.

After those four years of the boat business, he decided to quit and go to sea to learn more about boats experientially. He talked his way into a job with a crew that was competing in the transatlantic race from Quebec City to France. While sailing back from Bermuda on the training voyage, Rich and the crew were caught in a bad storm and their 50 ft catamaran pitchpoled (end over end) while Rich was steering. The crew was eventually rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter in the Gulf of St. Lawrence off the coast of Prince Edward Island. After some time to recover from his injuries, Rich and a friend left on a two-year round the world adventure via bicycle, sailboat, small plane, chicken buses, etc. In 1990 Rich received his Yacht Masters Captain license in England. After all of these experiences, having a “normal job” did not interest him. When a friend asked if he would be interested in belaying participants for some Pecos River Learning Center groups that he was contracted with, his steps into the adventure industry began. Being a part of that he was able to get more involved and soon heard about opportunities with Project Adventure in Canada.

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Originally working as an intern in Canada with Jim Schoel, he eventually relocated to Project Adventure in Massachusetts working with John Lazarus and Bob Ryan (among others).

His engineering expertise re-emerged when he started designing devices and developing products such as the K-2 Zip Pulley in the mid-1990s. *“A lot of what I designed for Project Adventure was based on what I knew from boats.”* He brought what he knew from designing and specifying boat hardware and used that towards the designs of products for Project Adventure.

His engineering background proved to be useful in other ways in our industry. In 1992, he found himself around a table at a camp in California providing opinions and his expertise towards our first set of construction standards. *“We had a group of smart, wise people come together, and we got to know each other really well because of the intense time we spent together trying to come to a consensus. It was very satisfying when the first edition was finished and I gained good long-term friends at the same time.”* The “Little Brown Book” was presented at the 1993 Symposium.

While working at Project Adventure, he met the love of his life, Elsje Zwart, who lived back in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. After they married in 1993, she moved to Massachusetts and joined PA as a corporate trainer, followed by various other jobs there for the next twelve years. *“I married up,”* says Rich.

In 2007, after seventeen good years at PA, Rich decided it was time to change things up. He had been spending a lot of his time over the previous decade getting involved and successfully racing in the open water (ocean) rowing world and wanted to learn from a local legend how to build high tech racing boats (shells). When he started his own consulting business, Sea Fox Consulting LLC, he was able to split his time between work at the boat shop while keeping his fingers in the challenge course world. The boat shop work lasted about three years as *“I went from having a low amount of challenge course related work to way too much over the past few years.”* These days Rich consults full time in our industry, providing training and inspection of various course and on expert witness work. He and Elsje now maintain two homes - the one they designed and built in Gloucester, Massachusetts twenty years ago (where Sea Fox Consulting is based), and another in Hamilton, Ontario, near where Rich grew up and closer to his and Elsje’s family, including their seven grandchildren.

Although Rich does not consider himself an engineering “Guru” as many have heard him called, he says “*you should learn from the best and seek out the best. Give the best advice you can and keep learning.*” Throughout ACCT history, Rich has been mostly involved in standards but has also been involved with government relations work, especially back when the state of Massachusetts decided to regulate challenge courses back in 2006. “*I think the accomplishments I’m most proud of in my work with ACCT have to be the standards (DPI in particular), how far they’ve come from the first edition, how well they’ve been accepted and used by thousands of people over the years.*”

He says that another accomplishment he is most proud of in our industry is “*the many people I’ve helped by “decoding” the standards and engineering principles behind them.*” Rich will be a part of a Pre-Conference panel at the Annual International ACCT Conference and Expo in February. This panel has come together to help “Demystify the ACCT Standards” and will also include current and former members from the Standards Writing Committees.