

Jonathan Thayn - A Map Maker's Route to Happiness

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Hundreds of hours go into Jonathan's detailed entries and watercolor paintings.

"I'm living the dream: I have four kids, an amazing wife and a broken-down minivan," quipped Jonathan Thayn, CEU alum '97.

He's joking about the minivan, but is genuine about his wife and children. Having a family like the one he grew up in has always been Thayn's first ambition. That destination was clear. Jonathan's journey to find the right career to support his family has taken a circuitous route.

"When you don't know what you're going to be when you grow up, you end up living in a lot of places," Thayn said.

Jonathan and his wife, Debbi Frame Thayn, CEU alum '96, had patience in the process and enjoyed the expedition. They cherish the experiences wandering brought: Mexico, Cuba, Panama, the Amazon Basin and Illinois (not quite as exotic as the Amazon, but still an adventure).

Now, Jonathan is firmly grounded as an associate professor of geography at Illinois State University, based in Normal, Illinois, but he isn't done wandering. He uses his profession as a launching pad to help others discover

the world the way he has- by traveling and soaking in every detail. As an expert in remote sensing, Thayn works to show his students the Earth with views from afar through satellite images and up close using expeditions into nature.

As a geographer, Thayn is also a map maker. He fastidiously keeps an adventure journal. This hand-bound book (made by Jonathan) details every trip with written accounts and Jonathan's own watercolor paintings and hand-drawn maps. The books are almost as magical as the trips. The most recent entry in the adventure log is the "Thayn Family's Six-Month Stint in Mexico."

Eligible for a sabbatical, Thayn looked for a place to conduct academic research while exposing his children to a new way of life.

Geography + Marine Biology = Exciting Plankton

Laying in a tent on the seashore at a whale camp, Jonathan and Debbi drifted off to sleep to the sound of whales coming to the surface, exhaling and taking in new air before plunging deep into the sea.

"The silence, broken by the whales' whooshing sounds, was magnificent. I was on the edge their world, trying to understand it. There is so much that goes on underwater that we just don't know about. It's intriguing," Thayn said.

During the day, Jonathan and his family boarded small boats to "meet" the whales. The mother whales swam up next to the boat and gently lifted their calves to the surface for the Thayns to caress. It seems unimaginable to be able to touch a whale calf in the ocean, but that is exactly what they did. "Most wild animals do not want their babies to be anywhere near humans.

Grey whales bring their babies up and say 'Hi!'" Thayn said. "It was breathtaking," said Jonathan's wife, Debbi. Grey whales, blue whales, humpbacks and fin whales travel across the world to birth their young in the Sea of Cortez's placid waters. They spend the winter months comfortably in the sheltered oceans between the Baja Peninsula and Mexico to give birth, then mate before returning to the cold arctic waters for the summer. Little is known about the whales, their migration and habits. Scientists theorize that this is the only place in the world that grey whales go to bear their calves.

What does a professor of geography have to do with whales? Jonathan was looking for a sabbatical

opportunity when in popped an email from Jaime Gómez-Gutiérrez, a marine biologist in Mexico. The whales in Mexico's seas are losing weight. Their undernourishment is alarming and marine biologists are investigating possible causes. Breaking new ground. Mexican scientists thought out of the box and approached Thayn hoping that his use of satellite imagery would be an asset. Jonathan liked the idea and got approval for a sabbatical to Mexico.

After planning meticulously, on Jan. 2, 2018, the Thayn family packed their van in snowy Illinois and headed south. They drove through U.S. State Department red zones (do not visit regions) to get to La Paz, a small town on the south interior of the Baja Peninsula.

When the Thayns pulled into town, the immigration officials informed them that they were missing the proper paperwork. Arguments, discussions and consulting an immigration attorney didn't do the trick, so they loaded up the family to drive two and half more days back to the border to get the correct papers. Jonathan's map of this car trip shows quite a few loops.

Settling into a little house two blocks from the beach, Jonathan spent the next few weeks on a research cruise with the National Autonomous University of Mexico and with the Center for Interdisciplinary Marine Science learning about marine biology and teaching them about satellite imagery. Then, Jonathan began studying and mapping photographs taken from space of plankton in the ocean to look for trends that might impact the whales.

They did discover that plankton masses are shifting. Water temperatures are increasing and affecting the quality of the whale's feed.

"We know that colder water is better for photosynthesis than warmer water," he said.

It was exciting for him to study how far satellite imagery can see into the ocean and work closely with marine biologists to find solutions. The questions are just beginning and Thayn will continue to work with scientists in Mexico to help the whales.

A Life Map with Loops

Living in Price, Utah, was the seedbed for Thayn's passion for all things outdoor. His parents took the family on many camping adventures growing up. When he graduated and started attending College of Eastern Utah, Thayn kept up his communion with nature.

A close friend, Jeff Goodrich, and Thayn made a goal to go camping every Thursday. After classes finished and often late into the night, they set off for an expedition to somewhere. Often they invited friends along and mishaps were common.

On one trip, they drove many miles on Wood Hill overlooking Price to camp. In the morning, their vehicle wouldn't start. Jonathan had a test that morning, so he and his friend walked to the college. Unkept, stinky and dirty, Jonathan made it to his test on time.

On another trip, they invited a friend who tried to study as they drove over pot-holed dirt roads for hours on end. Jonathan enjoyed the camping trip without studying and he outperformed his worried camp-mate on the test. It was her last camping trip with the group.

Experimenting

Wise parents, J. Boyd, CEU alum '69, and Mary, CEU alum '70, had two requirements for Jonathan's time in college. Boyd required him to keep a high grade point average, Mary requested Jonathan take an art class every semester. Following their advice has molded Thayn into a well-rounded person.

"I loved the art and photography classes at CEU. When I went to Brigham Young University, I wanted to take more and they required a student to be an art major for two semesters before they were eligible to try to enroll in a photography class," Thayn said.

His last two semesters at CEU, he had enough credits to graduate, so he could take whatever he wanted: river rafting, photography, sign language, astronomy and botany.

"It was a lot of fun, I loved going to CEU," he added.

Carrying on to BYU, Thayn graduated with a bachelor's degree in geographic information systems (GIS) and cartography. Struggling to know what profession to pursue, he decided to take the Graduate Record Examination at the last minute and enroll in a master's of public administration program. Graduating in 2002, Debbi and Jonathan moved their family to Lake Forest, Illinois. Jonathan landed an exciting apprenticeship with the CEO of a large hospital north of Chicago - an amazing opportunity - that he honestly hated.

As he watched the CEO work long hours making stressful decisions, trying to balance profit and healthcare, he realized that he did not want that life. He wondered as he

walked home one day how he would tell Debbi. She had sacrificed for Jonathan's education, they had started their family and he didn't have the heart to tell her he wanted to start over.

That day at dinner, Debbi said, "I don't think you like hospital administration, maybe you should go back to school."

Elated and confused, Thayne tried to figure out what to be a college professor of, as he was interested in several areas of study. A mentor suggested a foolproof way to decide, so Jonathan drove several hours to the nearest research university and spent the day reading research articles in the subjects he was thinking about. His adviser was right, though Jonathan enjoyed reading all of them, he didn't want to stop reading the geography papers. His decision was made.

It wasn't easy to apply to doctoral programs with an MPA, but he contacted Kevin P. Price at the University of Kansas. They made a connection, became quick friends and Price mentored him. Jonathan traveled to Brazil for another amazing adventure to research for his dissertation on locating dark earths in the Amazon.

~ *Renee Banaskya*