

Q&A: President of new B.C. university talks education, workplace health

Wolfgang Zimmermann says while Pacific Coast University's campus is based in Port Alberni, most programming is offered online

By Kevin Griffin, Vancouver Sun, September 25, 2014

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Wolfgang Zimmermann is president of Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences, which officially opened Thursday in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island.

Ten years in the making, the not-for-profit university will focus on all aspects of workplace health sciences.

Opening the university is a deeply personal accomplishment for Zimmerman, who became disabled after suffering a broken back 37 years ago while working as a logger for MacMillan Bloedel.

Zimmerman, who chatted with The Sun about the new school, was born in Dortmund, Germany and emigrated to Canada as an adult.

Q: Why have you established this university?

A: There is no dedicated university anywhere in the world that is focusing exclusively on all aspects of workplace health. You have bits and pieces of this entire field at various universities: some have occupational health programs, some rehabilitation programs, some disability management programs. We wanted to take an integrated approach to all aspects of workplace health. That really was the rationale.

Q: What can students receive at PCU that they can't elsewhere?

A: At this point, we have just launched our first degree — a bachelor's in disability management. No other institution in the world is offering anything like it. Provincial legislation allows us to offer certificates, diplomas, undergraduate and graduate degrees. We're at our infancy. I hope we'll build it so that individuals will be able to get a range of degrees and programs in all aspects related to workplace health.

Q: Do you have to take all courses on campus in Port Alberni?

A: Most of our programming is online. We will be looking at blended delivery like Royal Roads University in Victoria, where students will come on site for a period of time for certain courses. With distance education, location is not all that important anymore. We're about an hour out of Vancouver by air.

Q: Why is it located in Port Alberni?

A: The funding to build the physical construction of the university came through the federal government's Knowledge Infrastructure Program in 2009. The city of Port Alberni stepped up to the plate and donated 1.4 hectares of land. The physical campus is about a kilometre off the main highway that leads to Tofino. The university backs up on a nature reserve on two sides.

Economic diversification was also important. In the '70s there was well over 5,000 employed in the forest industry. Today there is less than 1,000.

We've seen the benefits of economic diversification. Over the last two years, we've run summer institutes at the university (for continuing education). We've had people attending from the U.S., across Canada and Europe. Almost without exception, they have stayed on to take longer vacation trips to the west coast.

Q: Why did you move from Germany to B.C.?

A: I met my wife in Germany. She was born in Port Alberni so I followed her. I initially graduated in civil and forest engineering and ended up working in the bush for MacMillan Bloedel in 1977. On the first week on the job, a 50-foot alder tree broke my back. It left me with a fairly severe spinal cord injury.

I was able to get back to work at a logging camp outside of Port Alberni. In those days, return to work and disability management were unheard of. Basically, you got hurt on the job and you became a ward of the Workers' Compensation Board.

There was a tremendous amount of commitment by both the company and the union. For the first time, they built ramps and changed washrooms. I was literally the first one with a severe injury to go back to work. After me, there were a number of others.

Q: What do you think accounts for your success since your workplace accident?

A: The fact that I had the ability to continue in the workforce. I wasn't isolated and pushed to the margins of society. For me, that was really key.

kevingriffin@vancouversun.com

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