

Myron Plett

> Class of '07

by Heather Conn

IT WASN'T a search for the perfect wave in wild West Coast surf that prompted Myron Plett to set up his law practice in Ucluelet, southwest of Tofino on Vancouver Island. "Lord, no," he says, by phone. "I'm from the Prairies."

Yet he always had a dream of living in a beautiful small town. Above his desk, Plett keeps a photo of his favourite local spot: ocean waters churn under a dash of blue sky as the Broken Group Islands beckon beyond the Lighthouse Loop trail.

A quest for more work in the slump of 2008 and early 2009, while a lawyer at Victoria-based MacIsaac and Company, brought Plett to this outdoor haven of 1,600+ people on the exposed tip of a Pacific peninsula. Beyond these practical concerns, though, lay the inspiration from a book by a born-and-raised Ucluelet author.

When Plett read *Beyond the Outer Shores* by Eric Enno Tamm about marine biologist, Ed Ricketts, who visited Ucluelet and marvelled at the marine life along its shores, he thought, "I want to go there." He admired this pioneering ecologist



from California who, in the 1930s, inspired friends John Steinbeck and mythologist Joseph Campbell to view all life, including tiny seashore species, as an interconnected, relational web, rather than separate components within a hierarchy.

Plett, who had a career as a classical pianist and music conductor before graduating from UBC Law in 2007, views his eclectic practice as its own form of ecosystem. "I'm not a set of boxes," he says. "These people [clients] don't want to come in for one thing." For instance, he might help the same client obtain a separation agreement, sell his house, get a will, and so on. Like most small-town lawyers, he's a generalist, offering services from real estate and commercial law to family and criminal law.

That's what makes Plett's practice an enjoyable intellectual challenge, he says. (Part of MacIsaac and Company's referral network, he opened Raincoast Law in 2010. He has an office in Ucluelet, and one in Tofino, staffed by associate Patrick Canning.) His clients have

diverse needs: they're salmon farmers, oyster-bed operators, fish plant employees, B&B owners, First Nations entrepreneurs, whale-watching outfits and other tourist-related small businesses. "No end of interesting things happen," he says. "You can be right in the middle of some very cutting-edge law."

Plett usually juggles 7 to 10 transactional files and about a dozen court files. With only one other lawyer in the region, who travels the island and has a Tofino office, he's so busy, he can pick and choose his cases, mostly keeping ones that he can get "really, really good and passionate about."

But such benefits come with their own challenges such as daunting demands to practise areas of law wholly new to him. Currently, family law comprises about 40 per cent of Plett's practice, yet he had done no law in this area before arriving in Ucluelet.

And sure, Plett's commute might be a blissful two-minute walk, but he's had to learn how to build extensive court-related travel into his workday without losing money. A barrister at heart, he's

isolated from the court system. Provincial court sits only once a month in Tofino and Ucluelet; otherwise, he has to travel 100 kilometres to Port Alberni. For Supreme Court sittings, he must travel 180 kilometres, or three hours each way, to Nanaimo. (Plett figures that annually, he puts on about 40,000 work-related clicks.) As a cost-saving solution, Plett now has his life partner Christoff drive him to court while he does casework in the car, on his laptop.

Some of Plett's clients don't have that option. Members of Ahousaht First Nations reserve, on Flores Island north of Ucluelet, have no land connection to Port Alberni. Therefore, any court appearance requires missing three days of work just for travel. Before a case even goes to trial, it might demand 18 to 20 days of missed work to attend hearings and related meetings. "People just cave in," Plett says. "They say: 'Just plead me guilty. I want to get this over with.'"

Many of Plett's clients can't afford a lawyer, yet Port Alberni is the closest place where someone

can sign up for legal aid, which comprises about 15 per cent of his practice. This lack of local infrastructure and resources is hugely prejudicial to his clients, Plett says. "People have it much tougher here. Absolutely."

Despite deep frustration over this issue, Plett says that it also spurs on his advocacy spirit. He'd like to see more lawyers in the region to provide increased service and support for both him and his clients.

To gain acceptance as a small-town lawyer, it's vital to stay involved in the community as a committed resident, says Plett. His office has sponsored a variety of community causes, including the historical society and a small aquarium. Drawing on his musical background, he has also brought the Vancouver Opera into local schools.

Not surprisingly, since setting up his practice, Plett has not found time to perform music publicly. However, he does keep his music ready and open on his piano. ■

