



The Challenger

Ada Tai overcame language barriers and cultural hurdles to achieve success

by Scott Rollans

When Ada Tai came to Edmonton from China five and a half years ago, she was in for a bit of a rude awakening — and it had nothing to do with the weather.

Like many new university students, Tai held a popular misconception about the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation. “My parents chose a program for me,” she explains, smiling. “I wanted something fun, and easy to take.” It didn’t take her long to realize that Phys Ed wasn’t exactly a free ride. “It turned out to be totally the opposite from what I expected. It was fun — I learned a lot about Canadian culture, and I met a lot of people. But assignments, readings and lectures — those were not fun!”

Like many international students, she also discovered the difference between studying English in grade school and attending university in an English-speaking country. “The language barrier and culture barrier was quite tough at the beginning,” she admits. “But I like to be challenged.”

She hit her stride quickly, and managed to squeeze her four-year program into three and a half years.

By the time she graduated in 2006, she had polished her English skills and gained a surprisingly broad education. “The program is so diverse,” she marvels. “It’s about tourism, it’s about management, it’s about leisure, about nature, about people, society, everything.”

University also launched Tai on a life-long project: learning the endless intricacies of Western social interaction. “In China, when we meet each other, we would never say, ‘How are you?’” laughs Tai. “Here, even a stranger will ask, ‘How are you?’ Or you will open the door for a stranger. In China, there are so many people that, if you opened a door for another person, you would be holding it for hours!”

After graduating, Tai took a job at a real estate company for a year. In the evenings, she continued to maintain a full course load, studying for certificates in business and human resources. “I wanted to do something in one of those areas,” she explains.

“It was quite hard, working during the day and taking courses full-time in the evening, but I knew where my passion was.”

Next, she took time off to travel to China, to see her family, and to Japan and Korea, to visit friends. Returning to Edmonton, she took a job as a human resources assistant at the Shaw Conference Centre, the job she holds today. “Mainly, I’m involved


in recruitment and selection, and retention strategies, staff events, policies and terminations,” she says.

Although her current position doesn’t draw directly on her degree, Tai credits the U of A for helping her to build the language skills and people skills she needs to succeed. “I did a lot of presentations and research papers. That definitely helped me. And I learned how to deal with Canadian people. I learned to be adaptable.”

In her spare time, Tai has also started a casual business with a friend from university. They import jewellery from China, and also design their own using imported beads. They call the line ‘Miss Oriental.’ “A lot of our jewellery is Tibetan or Oriental style, which is quite different from what you’d see here,” she explains. “And then, we also do accessories like scarves, gloves, shoes, handbags. We went to a couple of craft shows. It’s nothing formal. It’s just something we’d like to see, to learn.”

Tai remains physically active, a healthy habit she picked up at university. “In China, I didn’t get many chances to do gym, or to do exercise, because of the contained spaces,” she says. “Here, I had lots of chances to realize how important it is to be fit. So, I started to go to the gym in my first year. I learned how to play squash, and how to do yoga, and swimming, and jogging. I learned yoga with a teacher at the U of A, for the first year, and then I started doing it on my own. Now, I’m still doing it every morning when I get up. And I skip ropes when I have my coffee break at work. When it’s warmer, I do it outside. When it’s cold, I do it in the pedway.”

Now that she’s settled into a steady job, Tai looks forward to staying put — at least for the next couple of years. Then, she’ll roll up her sleeves and hit the books once again. “I don’t want to plan too far ahead, because things can change so quickly. But, for sure, I’m going to do an MBA. I haven’t decided at which university.”

No matter where her life takes her, her Physical Education and Recreation experience will continue to shape her, Tai insists. “At the U of A, I learned who I am. And I learned how I can grow with challenges like language and culture, and others.” 

Entrepreneurial alumna Ada Tai invites friends, alumni and former classmates to contact her by email at atai@edmonton.com. Tai’s ‘Miss Oriental’ line of jewellery is online at www.wapchina.net/mo/

“And I learned how I can grow with challenges like language and culture, and others.”



"The number one thing about my degree is, it taught me a lot about flexibility and adaptability."

photo: supplied

Have degree Will Travel

Michelle Saulnier has a passion for travel and grassroots community development

by Scott Rollans

When you're as well travelled as Michelle Saulnier, it helps to have an education that travels well.

Sixteen years after graduating, Saulnier (BA Rec Admin '93) has landed a community development position with the City of Calgary. En route to her current position, Saulnier has put her university training to work in a wide variety of ways, in an even wider variety of settings.

Fresh out of university, she took a job in High Level, in northern Alberta, with the RCMP Victim Services Unit. She spent five years in the community, working with a couple of non-profit agencies as well.

Then, in 1999, she wanted to fulfil a lifelong dream of living overseas. "A friend of mine was going to volunteer teach in Russia, and I thought I'd really like to do that," Saulnier explains. "I really wanted to do it before I turned 30, so I put the wheels in motion and made it happen."

Saulnier spent six months in Moscow as a volunteer teacher. The experience was transformative. Instead of returning home at the end of her term, she felt the urge to stretch herself even farther. "I ended up getting a paid position through the same company, and moved to Taiwan as an English teacher."

Eventually, Saulnier made her way back to Canada, and back to serving her community at a grassroots level. "I worked at the Mustard Seed homeless shelter for a couple of years, and was the executive director of the Victim Services Unit in Airdrie for three years."

Saulnier credits the U of A for equipping her with a solid set of skills, and the confidence to tackle any challenge that comes her way. "The number one thing about my degree is, it taught me a lot about flexibility and adaptability," she says.

Time and time again, Saulnier turned to her training. "Almost all of the jobs I've had have involved organizational management skills, financial management skills and people management skills. I learned those skills in university, and directly applied them to my jobs."

"A lot of my courses were in sociology, psychology, anthropology, organizational theories - and the whole recreation administration component. In my mind, it's one of the most applicable degrees. It has a broad enough scope that you can adapt it to a lot of jobs. Clearly, I'm an example of that."

It's also a degree that can, quite literally, take you places. "Overseas, that's where the flexibility and adaptability really come into play," laughs Saulnier. "It's a whole different world over there!"

In 2007, Saulnier again got the itch to explore new countries. "I ended up teaching English in South Korea for a year." In February 2008 she returned to Canada and achieved a professional milestone: "Although my non-profit positions often involved community development, it was never an explicit part of my job description. Now, with the City of Calgary, I'm finally in a community developer role. So, it only took 16 years!"

"I'm learning a lot in my professional role, being fairly new with the City. I work with aldermen's offices, and have quite a few high level responsibilities. So it was a really good step for me to come here."

Saulnier's official title is community recreation coordinator, but that's a bit of a misnomer, she says. "It's mostly doing community development work. I work with community associations and other organizations with all their governance issues, their strategic planning, their facility management and leases, and their community concerns."

Saulnier enjoys working as a liaison — keeping government in touch with the needs and issues of the community, while helping local citizens and groups navigate the tricky waters of municipal politics.

And whenever she gets time off, she still has the desire for travel. "Last year, I finally reached my goal of visiting 40 countries," she says. "I wanted the number to at least match my age, and now I've surpassed that at 38 years old."

Next, she says, "I want to see the Seven Wonders of the World. I'm at five right now."

Saulnier enjoys her current job, and has no immediate plans to give it up. But she senses that her university degree, which has taken her so far, will eventually take her somewhere new. "I know that, down the road, I'll be melding my passion for travel with my passion for working with communities," she says. "I've done volunteer community development work in Thailand at an elephant rescue camp and in South Korea at an orphanage and soup kitchen. That's where my heart lies, doing grassroots work. It's a little hard being right in the thick of the politics. It's a bit of a challenge, sometimes."

Not that she has any problem with challenges. "You'll always be hit with challenges. I learned that in South Korea, and Russia, and Taiwan. You take what you have and make the best of it. Stop worrying about the potholes in the road, and enjoy the journey! 🇦🇺"