

For the Beauty of the Earth

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FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH

Three unique landscapes—maybe four—tell you almost everything you need to know about Jander Talen ('10).

The first is where he grew up: Prince Edward Island, Canada.

His parents were immigrants; his father, a dairy farming family in Overijssel, the Netherlands, dreamed of a new operation in Canada. So, the Talens immigrated in 1980, began the search out west and moved ever eastward. They were choosy, looking for just the right operation: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba—Ontario seemed too busy. Finally, they found a foreclosed place almost as far as they could go east, on Prince Edward Island (PEI), where Jander was born.

Here's how Jander describes his PEI home: "Lush and fertile summers, colorful autumns, and winters sharp with biting cold and sideways snow

over rolling quilt-like fields stitched with spruce windrows. You're never more than a 25-minute drive from salt water, red cliffs, and sandy beaches."

"I don't really know that I realized how lucky I was to grow up in such a beautiful space," Jander says. PEI was a world of mussels and lobsters, of *Anne of Green Gables*, of sandy beaches and sun-stroked red cliffs.

So why leave? Older brother Wilbert ('06) loved his college experience at Dordt, so Dordt didn't seem so far. And moving away? Jander Talen comes from a family who'd prospected across the continent. In fact, when Jander came home after his first teaching job, his dad told him to go see the world.

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At Cochrane High School, Jander Talen teaches a course centered on outdoor education where students hike, camp, and learn in the great outdoors.

But not long before his first days at Dordt, another landscape influenced Jander. Newfoundland: rugged terrain, jagged coastlines, and a broad plateau full of rivers and lakes. Even though he was there for only a short time, Newfoundland inspired him.

He was part of a youth group led by a man who loved backpacking and took the group along on trips to places like New York State and New Hampshire. Then the group embarked on nine whole days in Newfoundland backcountry—one hour of which, by design, Jander and the other kids spent totally alone, beyond anything man-made, an hour that felt like six, a pilgrimage into sheer isolation he found powerfully, even utterly convincing.

"I remember sitting there, the first five or 10 minutes were novel, the next 10 or 20 minutes were boring," he says. "And then, in a moment, things started to click, and there was a beautiful sense of beauty and solitude and encountering God in a beautiful, wild place."

For a farm kid who'd never thought much about being outdoors, it was an experience not to be forgotten. Years later, he says that solitary hour in the wild was profound moment of worship.

That wilderness experience was just about all he thought about as he lugged his backpack to Sioux Center, Iowa. On the first day of class, Dr. Bill Elgersma ('81) asked students what they planned to do. Jander remembers how his fellow classmates called out titles like doctor, pastor, lawyer, businessman. He hardly dared announce to the room that he wanted to sell backpacking gear.

He was, in some ways, a stranger in a strange land. Today, he credits Professor Emeritus of Theology Dr. Jay Shim with helping him understand the Reformed Christian language everyone else seemed to speak so well. He'd never participated in choir; still, he tried out and made it. He found he loved music so much that he eventually graduated with a music education degree—another new landscape.

Jander loves generously; he approaches the world as if every inch is calling him. After graduation, he didn't have to look far for a music education job. "I moved to Sioux Center and taught there for two



The Galapagos giant tortoise, found on Santa Cruz Island, can live up to 170 years.

years—I loved that formative part of my life."

He married a young woman from Nova Scotia, Tiffany Blaauwendraat. They met at a youth group and reconnected in Michigan where he student taught and where she attended college. After his first year teaching at Sioux Center Christian School, they married. If you're wondering, yes, Tiffany has both an immigrant and a dairy background. The Talens now have three boys—Nieco, Zane, and Thijs.

Today, Jander and Tiffany live in Calgary, Alberta, where Tiff is attending graduate school and Jalen teaches, well, any number of things at Cochrane High School, 30 kilometers northwest of the city. Amazingly—and they would say blessedly, even providentially—they live a door down from Dr. Theo Mobach

('10), Jander's Dordt roommate, and his wife, Liz (Brand, '10) Mobach. When one couple needs sitters, the other is generally available. Even their children like each other.

Another landscape that Jander encountered is Uganda. After Sioux Center, the Talens decided to see the world. They applied all over the globe before settling on Uganda, which some call "the pearl of Africa."

"Lush, humid, and wonderfully chaotic" is how Jander describes his time in Kampala, Uganda. "Jackfruit and avocados on our property, mango trees at school. Cattle in the city and monkeys in our cafeteria. Big smiles and boundless generosity; tremendous wealth and poverty, a place that made us question what the word 'blessed' actually means."

A one-year stay turned into two. Jander taught music, while Tiffany worked as an aide and taught health education in local villages.

"We loved the community there: the culture, the food, everything. Leaving was one of the hardest goodbyes we ever had."

They headed to Calgary, where he once again taught music. Gradually, though, he shifted to a popular elective course called "Outdoor Education." After all, the Rocky Mountains loomed over the city.



"On the Galapagos Islands' coastlines, we marveled at the sea lions," says Jander Talen.

The course goal is to strengthen students' connection to and knowledge of the natural world by helping them gain skills to live in the wilderness. It is a "school within a school," where students spend all day outside.

"I suppose I tried to recreate that Newfoundland moment I had on the side of the mountain in solitude, encountering the beauty of creation," reflects Jander.

When he heard about the Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship, an exclusive *National Geographic* program offering professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers, it seemed like a great fit for him. Grosvenor Teacher Fellows visit places like Indonesia, Egypt, Antarctica, Costa Rica, or Patagonia for life-changing, field-based experiences. The fellows then bring their experiences back to the classroom, where they teach students, engage colleagues, and bring new geographic awareness into their learning environments and communities.

The fellowship was simultaneously a reach and a perfect fit for him. In the end, he was one of only 50 applicants from around the world to be accepted to the Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship.

The National Geographic gave him a choice as to where he could go. He picked the Galapagos Islands, 1,000 kilometers off the coast of Ecuador. It's a place where volcanic islands and islets break the monotony of the ocean, where everything grows "almost too well," says Jander.

"Drift snorkeling opened up a world that was almost unfathomable: spotted eagle rays and blue-chinned parrotfish, Sally Lightfoot crab and black striped salimas, sea lions and sea turtles."

Jander's boundless curiosity made the Galapagos Island seem like a dream. He spent 10 days there, traveling aboard the National Geographic Endeavor II with Lindblad Expeditions.

It was, in many ways, the opportunity of a lifetime. "It was a chance to learn



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Jander and Tiffany sometimes refer to their time in the Galapagos Islands as "Thijs' adventure," since "it's because he was born that we got to take time off work as a family."

and be affirmed of what I'm doing at Cochrane High School," Jander told *The Cochrane Times*. "As an outdoor education teacher, one of my biggest hopes is to get students to love their local natural spaces."

For Jander, it took about three days for him to fall in love with the ecosystem, environment, landscape, wildlife, and different groups of people in the Galapagos.

When he returned to Calgary, he decided that, as impossible as it might seem, he had to go again—this time, not alone. He took his entire family, including a newborn son. As a Canadian citizen, Jander was given a certain amount of paternity leave after his youngest son was born.

"We had planned for a parental leave anyway, so we said, 'Let's make the Galapagos our destination,'" he says.

Using Jander's connections, the Talens partnered with a man Jander met on the National Geographic Endeavor II, a naturalist who owned a permaculture farm. They went there to work and to explore the world for themselves and with their children.

Now having returned to Calgary, vivid memories of their time in the Galapagos linger: huge, cartoon-like fish; vibrant birds like the blue-footed boobie; giant tortoises big as a kitchen table. Bike trips totally alone through a landscape that seemed almost otherworldly.

"While snorkeling, I came across a marine iguana feeding on some algae. What an amazing creature! Seemed like a collision of worlds: the land and the sea. The abundance of life underwater is in your face as soon as you look below the surface."

Highlights abound, too many to count on fingers and toes: the boys in their goggles and snorkels, plenty of giggles, and a wealth of unforgettable experiences.

Through this and every adventure, Jander, his life full of unforgettable landscapes, has come to understand that there's not an inch of creation that doesn't belong to the one who fashioned it all.

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP ('70)