



EXTRAORDINARY EMPLOYEES

Don Fraser: A Passion for Adventure and Service

by SU CLAUSON-WICKER

Don Fraser has one of those interesting, unusual jobs that can only be found at a large research university. Actually, the Virginia Tech alumnus, who earned a bachelor of science in biology in 2007, has two unique jobs, both involving travel, adventure, and helping others.

navigates the waters as well or better than the local watermen. The research team had full confidence in his shuttling us back and forth on a daily basis.”

Fraser acquired his nautical skill under the tutelage of his father, Professor Jim Fraser, a noted ornithologist and wildlife researcher in the college. The younger Fraser remains excited about the college’s research and the adventures he is undertaking in the name of science. “Sometimes I can’t believe I’m getting paid for this,” he says.

Fraser’s other passion, founding and running Bike the US for MS, is rooted in his concern for his mother, Nina, who has been living with multiple sclerosis (MS) for 31 years. The nonprofit organization, of which he serves as executive director, promotes research and support for patients with MS, a chronic and disabling disease affecting about 400,000 Americans. Neither the cure nor the cause of the disease is known, a fact Fraser and fellow cyclists want to change. It is not a paying job, but a labor of love.

Fraser first set out with three friends on a two-month transcontinental bike ride in 2007 to raise funds and awareness for MS. He repeated the trip in 2009 with 12 cyclists. The number of riders doubled the following year and grew to 140 in 2014. Now in its eighth year, Bike the US for MS offers four east-west cross-country trips, two north-south trips, and the option of cycling segments with the group. Half of the participants’ \$1 per mile fee, often raised through donations, goes toward MS research or patient support. Along the way, riders complete service projects for MS patients.

About this series

The Extraordinary Employee series highlights the achievements of Virginia Tech employees who go above and beyond, making a difference in the lives of others on campus and in the community.



Don Fraser not only captains the boats for college researchers but is responsible for hauling them to such places as Virginia’s Eastern Shore and the Gulf of Mexico, including the large queen of the college’s fleet, pictured here.

Ten years ago while still a student, Fraser started working for the Virginia Tech Shorebird Program in the College of Natural Resources and Environment as a technician and boat operator. In 2010, he was promoted to watercraft operations manager, providing logistical support for college research, especially for projects taking place along coastlines and waterways.

“I operate the boat in tricky places off the Atlantic coast, keep the ATVs and watercraft working, and have traps, nets, and other equipment ready to go,” he says. “I’ll get calls from research technicians who need to be picked up after sampling different islands.”

Fraser holds a U.S. Coast Guard captain’s license for vessels under 50 tons, a necessity in this job because of the volume of research on birds, fish, and other animals the college conducts that requires the use of a boat.

“The waters around Virginia’s barrier islands can be very tricky to navigate,” says Lynn Davis, the college’s communication manager, who spent a week observing research on tiny shorebirds called red knots. “Boaters often run aground because channels are narrow and always changing. Don



Don Fraser (front, far right) and with the riders, including 11 Virginia Tech alumni, in San Francisco at the conclusion of the 2010 ride.

“Many say service projects are the most life-changing part of the trip,” Fraser says.

As the event has grown, so has its impact. The group has raised \$1.3 million through 2014 and funded research, treatments, home modifications, and a nurse practitioner position at James Q. Miller MS Clinic in Charlottesville as well contributions to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s NOW (No Opportunity Wasted) campaign.

Fraser, who no longer makes the cross-country trek but rides segments when he can, is now recruiting for the 2015 ride. “The day-to-day challenges of the ride are challenges that you can live through,” he said. “You push and survive, and in the end you will be stronger and more confident, just like people who have to live with MS.”

First published March 1, 2015.

www.hr.vt.edu/extraordinary_employees/2015/don-fraser/

Su Clauson-Wicker is a writer for the College of Natural Resources and Environment.



Don Fraser (foreground) helps his father, Professor Jim Fraser (in red and white hat), and other researchers lay netting for shorebird research on Virginia’s barrier islands.