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# DENALI: WHO WE ARE

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By Vanessa Juszczak

*There is a long list of reasons people are drawn to Denali and its surrounding areas: adventure - wilderness - stillness - wildlife. But whether you were born here, or transplanted here, there is always one answer near the top of the list, when asked "why did you stay". **The people.***

*When I began brainstorming for this series, I had a list of the type of people I wanted to visit with: diverse ages, those born here and those who moved here, people who embrace the land and people who stay despite it. Most importantly though, the people who feel passionate about this place we all call home. With the last criteria at the forefront of my mind, the first person who came to mind was Dana Williams of Cantwell, AK.*

In 1997, with a fully packed Subaru and two friends, Dana Williams decided on a whim to visit Alaska. Born and raised in South Carolina, she had made her way to Colorado and was working as a ski instructor when she came across an article in Backpackers Magazine. Young and looking for her next adventure, "why not" was as good a reason as any.



"We showed up in April, drove across the Denali Highway\* and ended up in Healy. We just got a park permit to go backpacking, but we didn't know where we were going to live, and we didn't really plan to stay here for very long. We were just going to visit." April in Denali, in 1997 was nothing like it is now. There was little hustle and bustle and many of the hotels and shops that line the canyon just to the north of Denali National Park didn't exist then.

“My first job was at the old Smoke Shack, and then I started to serve coffee at Black Bear Coffee House. So, that’s how I ended up just coming for a backpacking trip, not really having a plan after that, and deciding this is pretty cool, let’s stay for the summer.”

For the first 3 years Dana was in Denali, she worked as so many do, seasonally. During the winters she traveled to New Zealand, Australia, and Costa Rica. She kept returning, to make enough money to continue her travels, but at the end of her third year she decided that Alaska was for her. She was tired of living out of her car and thought maybe she should experience an Alaskan winter. Her first job during an Alaskan winter was as a construction laborer for the Grande Denali Lodge, when they were building their hotel. “I knew nothing about construction. I was just hired on as a grunt: shoveling snow and packing boards, and whatnot, and that’s when I met Lance. He was a carpenter on that job site. So that’s when I bought the property and we ended up building a cabin that next year. And it’s been Cantwell ever since.”

Many of her friends had purchased land in the Cantwell area known as Jack River Nation, and this is where Dana decided to settle as well. This is where she spent her first winter, in a wall tent with a plywood floor - an act that even many of those born and raised in Alaska wouldn’t attempt. Cantwell is a small town 27 miles to the south of the Denali Park Entrance. It is currently populated with about 200 year-round residents.

Now, 18 years later, Dana lives a life she probably couldn’t have ever imagined on the drive to Alaska 21 years ago.

She and her husband Lance, originally from Idaho, married in 2002. They have two children, Amelia (13) and Reid (9). They have upgraded from the small cabin in Jack River Nation to a beautiful log home in the town of Cantwell itself.



When I asked her, “what made you stay”, she couldn’t point to one thing. It was a combination of everything. The sense of community, the opportunities, the outdoors. “We were recently in Kauai and we met this lady who was asking us ‘what is your passion?’ So, I was thinking, what *is* my passion? And I think, other than my family of course, it is skiing. I love cross country skiing. So if I don’t ski almost every day, I start to climb out of my skin.”

She particularly enjoys that the things she loves to do here, she can do with her family. “I was thinking, if I couldn’t get outside, would I like it here as much? And probably not. Ya know, I just love what the outdoors has to offer in this area. We berry pick, and hike and fish and hunt.” The Williams family is always on the move, and most of the time, that involves a sport or outdoor activity of some kind. Her kids are active in local sports: hockey, basketball, volleyball and the family spends a lot of time together camping and hiking all over the state. Lance, her husband, is a licensed pilot with his own businesses that affords the family the opportunity to fully engage their adventurous spirits in places otherwise unreachable.

Dana’s face just shines when talking about her family and her home. You can feel her words in her smile.



“I love this area, just because of what it has to offer. I just keep thinking, this is a place where people spend their whole lives saving money to come - their once in a lifetime trip - and here we are, we get to live here! And it’s not easy, it’s definitely not easy - and it’s not for everybody, but I love it. And it just makes me feel so alive. And I think it is the hiking, and the mountains and the harshness of it all. You can hate it, or you can embrace it and think ‘this is the real deal’. It just invigorates me.”

\*Denali Highway – did you know that the Denali Highway is one of only thirteen recognized highways in the state of Alaska? Of those thirteen, five have sections that are unpaved. The Denali Highway has the second longest portion of unpaved road, behind only the Dalton Highway, which is primarily used to access the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. The Denali Highway is primarily used by Alaska residents for outdoor recreation and sightseers who want to add some adventure to their Alaskan experience.