

TAKING THE HELM: MIKE RICHARDSON NEW TLA PRESIDENT

By Robin Brunet

He frequently refers to it as restless-ness, but curiosity is an equally applicable word to explain the sheer number of jobs comprising Mike Richardson's 42 years of experience in the BC forest industry, as well as the number of companies he has worked with.

But that's not to say he hasn't forged long-lasting relationships. In fact, he's retained friendships—including a business partnership with the Olsen family (of Olsen Management Group fame)—for as long as he's been in the bush. And this, along with his accumulated knowledge about logging and a myriad of issues, serves him well as the new president of the Truck Loggers Association.

Upon being elected to presidency at the annual TLA convention in January, the Campbell River-based Richardson lost no time stating what he believes to be the top priority for the association in 2018. "The Contractor Sustainability Review must be our main advocacy focus," he said. "The TLA has worked hard to have the Review happen, and we look forward to working with government and industry to implement any recommendations that improve the lot of timber harvesting contractors in BC."

A month later, Richardson was even more anxious to act upon the Review.

"We had hoped the findings would be published by now, and we're still hoping that once the new provincial government has a chance to digest the contents, we'll be asked to the table to go over the findings," he says.

Richardson, who has worked for the majors and been "bitten" by the contracting bug several times in his long career, adds, "The fact that contracting is no longer an attractive way to make a living is one of the most troubling aspects of our industry today. The margins are extremely low, it's tough to invest in equipment, and work prospects are such that in recent years it's been easier for seasoned contractors to simply auction off their assets and get out of the business entirely."

At the very least, Richardson expects Victoria to recognize the problems facing contractors and identify the causes, and he notes that BC Premier John Horgan seemed to acknowledge this during his address to members at the January convention (for the record, he stated that "Licensees appear to have more sway than they've ever had before, and less responsibility than they've ever had before...it's a certainty in many communities that the relationship between the tenure holder and community has been broken").

Dating back to its formative years, the TLA has been led by people whose entrepreneurial spirit was informed by years of cold rain running down their necks. Richardson is no different and he is also similar to many of his predecessors when he confesses to never imagining he would be president of an advocacy group. "In fact, when Graham Lasure asked me five years ago to sit on the board, I was reluctant to do so because I was too busy," he recalls. "But I said yes, and I wound up loving every minute of my involvement."

Unlike many of his colleagues, Victoria-born Richardson, 59, did not grow up in a logging family. His father was a towboat operator, and while Richardson enjoyed accompanying him to tow booms along the coast, his love of the outdoors led him to join Crown Zellerbach in 1976 as a chokerman.

Richardson appreciates that younger people may find the idea of wandering into the profession and getting a job with minimal effort exceedingly simplistic. "But that's exactly what the industry used to be like and why we're so motivated to improve our current situation," he says. "There were lots of jobs back then, all of them well-paying, and you literally only had to show up



on Friday in the marshaling yard to get your start—which is what I did.”

Richardson vividly remembers the end of his first day at Lake Cowichan, in November, roasting sausages over a fire with his workmates. “It was freezing, and it flashed through my mind, ‘is this really a good career choice?’ But I knew it was, because of the wonderful camaraderie I had experienced that day, and of everyone looking out for each other. Of course, the notion I’d made the right choice was reinforced when I got my first paycheck; but the camaraderie was foremost.”

Richardson spent five years at Crown Zellerbach, working up to the position of hook tender, before his thirst for new horizons led him to relocate to Campbell River. “After that I became a steel spar operator and was exposed to labour contracting, which led me to form Richardson Logging Ltd. and offering contracting services up and down the coast,” he recalls. “In the 1990s I moved to the Queen Charlotte Islands for Mid Coast Contracting as a grapple yarder operator.”

Mid Coast is a prime example of the people relationships Richardson values so highly. “Mid Coast was owned by Ron Ketch, who I worked alongside during my very first day in the bush in 1976,” he says.

It was in Sandspit on Moresby Island, in 1992, when Richardson met his future wife Lorenda, who was then a substitute teacher. The logging operation he worked for was relocating, but MacMillan Bloedel provided him with a chance to stay put as a woods foreman. “Needless to say I accepted the position in order to be with Lorenda, and by the time I was transferred to Vancouver Island several years later she and I had twin daughters.”

Ultimately, the couple would raise four daughters and four sons, none of whom have followed in their father’s footsteps—not because of the current state of the



industry, but because they inherited their parents' curiosity and pursued passions in other fields.

Richardson was MacBlo's general foreman for the North Island Timberlands division in Menzies Bay from 1997 to 2004; then he was bitten once more by the contracting bug and spent three years as Immediate Past President Jacqui Beban's logging manager. His long-time association with the Olsen family resulted in several business ventures, including a management stint at Taan Forest LP where he was part of a team that trained Haida First Nations members to assume control of their land base. "They wound up doing an excellent job of it, as well as launching other business ventures such as fishing lodges, restaurants and hotels, creating a lot of local employment," he re-

calls. Most recently, Richardson became a partner with Keith and Kyle Olsen in Tsibass Construction Ltd., a stump-to-dump logging contractor based out of Campbell River.

Aside from the numerous skills he has honed over the years, Richardson has developed a positive mindset from covering so many bases in the forestry industry. "I've worn a lot of hats and known a wide range of people who, from an outsider's perspective, have nothing in common and yet are able to work together towards common goals," he says. "So I firmly believe common ground can be reached in the most contentious issues facing us today, such as the contractor/licensee relationship."

As an industry veteran, Richardson is far more interested in building bridges

than playing favourites. "We at the TLA had a fabulous relationship with the BC Liberals, and it's gratifying that we're developing an equally strong relationship with the John Horgan government," he says. "In fact, I was most impressed when Doug Donaldson was named Forests Minister: he's from a small community and understands the importance of small business operators supporting regional economies."

The Contractor Sustainability Review isn't the only thing on the TLA president's radar: so is the attrition of our workforce. "We have to do a better job of attracting newcomers and sending the message that we're a safe, sustainable, and well-paying industry," he says. "An accompanying issue is that the only way for small operators to take advantage of new blood to the industry is to train them on site—which unfortunately takes key people and equipment out of the loop.

"It's not an easy problem to solve, but we think it can be alleviated if some form of tax credit is introduced. We began this conversation with the BC Liberals and are continuing it with the NDP, and we're hopeful they appreciate the bind small operators are in."

As always, reaching out to young people in the school system is another objective for the TLA and Richardson. "Continued progress is being made in this realm, thanks to our Forestry Education Fund and our sponsorship of high school forestry programs in Campbell River, Port Alberni, Port Hardy, and Port McNeill," he says. "Plus, the TLA supports forestry scholarships for university students as well as five trades scholarships yearly.

"Meanwhile, Brenda Martin, who was the TLA's director of communications for five years, takes groups of teachers into the woods for the informational Festival of Forestry, which is a very clever initiative. Obviously, our goal is to create new programs and extend our reach in the near future."

But from a personal perspective, Richardson is most looking forward to forging new relationships as he advances the TLA's mandates. "The best part of this job is working with such a wide range of people," he says. "The camaraderie that first impressed me in the 1970s is evident wherever I go, and it continues to inspire me to give back to an industry that has given me so much."▲