

# An ordinary Joe with an extraordinary challenge

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Editor

Joe Sielias once bought a house from the Queen, and has the signed papers with her signature from the sale to prove it. Sielias is from the Netherlands, and the Dutch royal family own properties, which they lease to locals. Occasionally the monarchy sells off a farmhouse. “The house was in the royal family forever,” says Joe, who has a picture of the Dutch Queen and her husband in his house when it was still in the royal family. Today, however, Joe and his family are about to have to move from a rental home on Bowen Island, uncertain if they will find anywhere to live due to the crazy west coast housing market. “On this island, there is nothing to buy, or rent,” says Sielias, who is feeling pressure as the home they have been in for six years was put up for sale and sold with little warning. Joe and Andrea have a son, Flint, who was born in that house in Holland. They also have businesses, friends and a community where they feel very much at home. “I grew up in a small community like Bowen and wanted to find that for my son,” says Sielias.

***“We wanted a place where we would feel safe, where every body knows each other and you go into a store, and know the people. – Where you share so much in common. That’s already gone in the Netherlands.”***

Joe’s story goes back to Apeldoorn, where he and his brother helped their mother maintain their home while their dad was away with the military. The brother’s took on all the odd jobs that needed to be done around the house, learning valuable skills that would affect Joe’s future. For the time being, however, Joe went to university and got a degree in journalism but quickly shifted out of that pursuit to join the Dutch Railways. Sielias describes his job as a young man, maintaining the peace on the trains. “Canadians are polite, but in the Netherlands there was a lot of fighting and violence on trains.” The railway decided to hire Special Agents. These were men who were like undercover police, whose job it was to manage any rule-breakers with the authority to make arrests. Sielias says the decision to hire Special Agents came after the chaos led to two train conductors being thrown from speeding trains. “There were stabbings, fights, and

someone was killed.” He learned quickly to pick up the nuances suggesting a potential threat, and learned how to stay safe, and lower the tension in situation. He began going to schools to talk to kids to help them gain awareness of how their destructive behavior affected others. “These kids would burn buses for fun.”

***Sielias gives you the sense that he would be unflappable and calm in this situation, but right now with his future beyond his control, his normally laughing eyes have a different look. He is hiding his worry with a quick sense of humour and calm tone.***

He describes how working in the schools acted as a stepping stone into teaching troubled kids which led to a second degree, this time in Social Work. For the next eight years, Sielias tried to inspire real change among troubled institutionalized teens. “I worked at an institution where minors were forced into treatment. It was like a prison with killers, rapists, arsonists.” He says the people at the institution had miserable lives growing up, and working with them was exhausting. “For eight years I lived with them. I learned to be very patient, to accept small slow steps.” As the troubled teens learned from their mentor, he also learned from them. “Finally, I ended up teaching at the school on the grounds,” says Sielias. “I taught kids 16 - 18 with behavior problems for 10 years. Andrea, did it since she was 18,” says Joe, referring to his wife. “She went to families to offer help and advice and take them away for a change.” Sielias says by the end of his time as a social worker he had seen it all and was drained, “knives, guns, stabbings, I saw it all.” He found it difficult to abide by the slow timelines required for results in this kind of work. “I want to see results, and that took years and years, and then only five to 10 percent made it back out to live a good life.”

Worn down by the work with the institution, the couple also worked on their home; They fixed that house and sold it, and then continued to buy run down places with no electricity, fix them and sell them, all the while working four days a week as psychologists, three days in construction. “I liked the process of seeing results within two years,” says Sielias. By the time they found the queen’s house, they were ready to start a family and, having been trying for years, Flint was



The housing market is pushing people like Joe Sielias out of their rentals homes and there are no homes available to buy. photo Louise Loik

born. The two decided it was time for a change. They wanted their young son to have the kind of wide open future they felt was available in Canada. “In the Netherlands everything is taken care of for you, from the cradle to the grave. Everything is organized and planned, there is no flexibility.” Sielias describes a school system in which kids in kindergarten are tested for aptitudes and the child begins to pursue the education best suited to their aptitudes. At 12, kids go for two days of testing. The results determine where the child can study, what they can study and what they will do for a profession. “The families are so stressed before that test,” says Sielias. “There’s more to life. You should be able to trust experience more. In Canada, you can go anywhere, become anything, as an individual, and as a country.” Andrea lived in Canada in her early 20s and like her husband, grew up in the country. “We drove across Canada twice,” says Sielias. “we stopped in every small town, talking to the locals, trying to get a feel for the place.” When they decided to move to Canada, luck was with them as Canada had short-listed psychologists for immigration. They bought a house in PEI and Joe relearned how to do homebuilding projects with a different electrical system, an imperial as opposed to metric system, and all different materials. He worked on the house with Andrea for one year, after which they sold the house to a man from Bowen Island. The west-coaster, upon hearing that Joe and Andrea were looking for a small town in which to raise their son, asked them if

they’d ever heard of Bowen Island. The family flew from PEI to Bowen and knew they’d found their home. That was seven years ago. “People thought were crazy to leave the Netherlands. I came here and was making five percent of my income from before, and now I still only make 50 per cent of what I was making, but I don’t care. When we decided to come here, we didn’t see it as risk, we saw it as opportunity.” Joe and Andrea built businesses in small home maintenance and landscaping or gardening jobs, along with a fencing business called “Friendly Fencing.” – the whole product is environmentally friendly. All the wood is salvaged, no trees are cut and it’s hand made with the recycled wood. What Sielias really likes about his work is that he is always able to innovate, and be creative. He says that with many of the seniors that hire him, he is helping them stay in their homes. “That’s important work,” he says, “and there is going to be more demand for handy work for assisted living.”

***“We want to help, and there’s a big social factor to the job, we aren’t just building, we are building connections.”***

The home that Joe, Andrea and Flint have been living in, sold with a fall closing date which means they will need to find something to buy or rent, which is a challenge. “I just want to be here, on Bowen. We are still hoping for the best.” With that, he smiles and is off to a job, and to continue to build connections.