

Tofino Mayor Josie Osborne on the mudflats behind the Tofino Botanical Gardens, which she owns with her husband, George Patterson.



SMALL

TOWN BIG PROFILE

As mayor of a small community known as a global tourism destination, Josie Osborne is making a big impression, navigating Tofino through a recent high-profile tragedy and keeping the town on course for future economic success.

JOSIE OSBORNE is in problem-solving mode, using a tidal app on her phone to find me the best time to go for her recommended hike at Schooner Cove after our interview. Her enthusiasm for the endeavour and the area is contagious. It might be 8:30 a.m., but Osborne has already completed her own daily walk and is ready for a full day of meetings. Rain or shine, she's up at 5:30 most mornings for a five-kilometre trek with friends on Chesterman Beach — the stretch of beach we're currently admiring from our perch at the Driftwood Café at The Wickaninnish Inn. Given her full days, that early exercise is often the only time she has for herself.

Being mayor of a town with a population of 2,000 might not seem like a high-pressure gig, but Tofino (known as "Tuff" by locals) has big-name recognition. In fact, the Tofino-Long Beach-Ucluelet area is globally lauded for its rugged coastal beauty, rainforests and surf culture, which draw more than a million tourists to the area every year. But the recent whale-watching accident, when six people drowned after the capsizing of the *Leviathan II*, brought the small town worldwide media attention of a tragic nature.

"[Josie] really represented our community and our values well in that situation," says Jen Dart, executive director of the Tofino-Long Beach Chamber of Commerce. "We were very glad to have her as the face of Tofino."

Raised on Vancouver Island in Central Saanich, Courtenay and Nanaimo, and educated at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, Osborne moved to Tofino in 1998 to work as a fisheries biologist for the Nuuchah-nulth Tribal Council.

"I figured I would stay here for three, maybe five years max, and then I would go back to the big city," Osborne says. "And I never left. Which is pretty much the story of most people who have moved to Tofino. They come for a weekend, stay for a lifetime."

After ten years with the tribal council and then a stretch at the Raincoast Education Society, an educational non-profit, she turned her focus to the tourism-based enterprises that she and her husband own, including

a café, two accommodation businesses and the Tofino Botanical Gardens. She "stepped away from the business a bit" and from her role as chair of the Tourism Tofino Board of Directors after becoming mayor in January of 2013 when the previous mayor resigned.

She was re-elected by acclamation in November 2014. Locals describe her leadership as communicative and accessible.

"She brings a long history in the community from before she got into municipal politics," Dart says. "She was always a prominent figure in the community, so everyone feels they can speak directly to her, which I think is quite rare."

That sense of community has much to do with why Osborne stayed in Tofino.

"There is something about being in a small town where, when the times get tough, you're all here for each other," she says. "And obviously, that really showed with the *Leviathan* tragedy. It brings a lot of meaning to people's lives when you know you're really connected to people. So whether

you create that neighbourhood in a big city or in a small town, it's something that has always been really important to me."

Your recent PowerHERhouse presentation in Nanaimo focused on the difference between having a tough skin and a permeable one. How do you use this as mayor?

One of my misconceptions about politics was that you need a very tough skin because of the barbs and arrows that are inevitably going to come your way. I wasn't sure I could take that kind of personal attack. That was probably the most difficult part of making the decision to run for mayor. Have you read *The Four Agreements* [by Don Miguel Ruiz]? One of them is: don't take things personally. I very much have taken that to heart. That means when you're listening to somebody who is offering criticism, you have to be able to filter criticism of the idea from criticism of you as a person. That's why you need that permeable skin, because you've got to let the right stuff in and you've got to keep the wrong stuff out.

You also have to let yourself feel. The office is very important and there is a responsibility that comes with the office, but you're still a human being.

TUFF TALK

"Looking at the sociopolitical history of Clayoquot Sound, with its blockades and protests about old growth logging, Westerners could benefit from understanding how fundamental a relationship the First Nations have with the land."

Did this practice help you get through the recent tragedy with the Leviathan II?

It certainly did. After the *Leviathan*, I knew I had a particular role to play and I needed to step up and do it. And I absolutely did it. But I gave myself time to be alone or space to be with a good friend or my husband — the few people I would trust to show everything ...

People look to their leaders for strength, and they need to see that. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to not be able to show that strength. At the same time, it's important to be humble and show that you're human. Everybody needs to see that there are points where you might be struggling but that you know how to get help.

One of the other things that was really important to me in the immediate days afterwards was to create that space, to allow everyone, especially the survivors, to do what they needed to do without being highlighted by the media or being contacted by the media. So I was available pretty much 24/7 for the first three days, because that gave the media somebody local to hear. I didn't want it to have to be somebody who had been heavily involved in the tragedy.

What does the path forward look like?

It's a rocky road and there have been a lot of ups and downs ... I think it's really individual.

It's actually been a huge learning lesson about the resilience we have as individuals and as a community, but also about the different pace at which people heal. It's really important to respect people for where they're at and to make sure they're getting the help they need. It's just going to take time, that's really the only thing.

How closely do you work with the area's First Nations?

We have a very cordial and collaborative relationship. There are definitely hard topics to discuss, but we are able to sit down and discuss them. What is best about the relationship between the municipal government and First Nations is there is a high level of mutual respect, which means that we can tackle those harder conversations. And there's not a sense of having to rush. We're all here to stay and we're trying to figure out the best way to coexist together.

Speaking of hard conversations, as a fairly vocal environmentalist, how do you balance that with important local industries like salmon farming?

I think that the resource economies of Clayoquot Sound are an important part of what we do. Salmon farming is a big employer and it brings a lot of value into the local economy. Logging, not so much anymore. In fact the Aousaht First Nation has recently stated that

they have stopped all industrial logging [in their territory]. I think people are pursuing more sustainable and renewable ways. I completely accept that humans use resources and that we depend on them for a high quality of life. These industries employ us and it's really important to be able to take care of your family and live within your means. I think that's exactly how I view it: that we need to live within our means, both as individuals and within the environment. Being declared an UNESCO Biosphere Reserve brings a greater sense of responsibility to living within our means in this world. So salmon farming, if its activities are not causing irreparable damage or harm, then I accept that. Old-growth logging is not one of those things.

What are the concerns for small businesses in Tofino?

Dealing with seasonality has been a big issue. A year and a half ago we conducted business walks, and a dominant theme that came out of that was that businesses wanted to be less seasonal so they could afford to pay employees more so they could afford the housing in town. There is a perfect storm of seasonality and affordability that affects business, and the housing piece is a big one. Businesses are really struggling to find suitable employees who have adequate accommodation.

Was that why you held a forum on tiny houses?

We did a housing needs-and-demand assessment and that was finished in June, and we have a much stronger understanding of who lives in Tofino: whether they're single, or in couples or have families, what their median incomes are, what they can actually afford to rent and what rents are — and we know there is a big gap. And so we've been going through some of those numbers with people in focus groups and forums, like the tiny-house forum, to really understand how it is that people want to live and what they're looking for and what obstacles they have finding rental accommodation or getting into the market.

I was looking at your Twitter feed and something that came up a lot is participatory budgeting.

I'm very interested in citizen engagement and how to better reach people and have them influence decisions between elections — not just voting for leadership and then letting them make all the decisions. Participatory budgeting is a way of including the community in the decision making about municipal budgets. So instead of council making the decision about the grants that we give out every year, last year we turned it back to the community. The organizations that applied for grants did up displays and we had an exposition, a voting day when people came to the council chamber and they talked to the organizations, learned about the projects and voted for the ones they thought were the best for the community.

You seem very engaged with social media.

What advantages do you find in using it?

Social media does two things for me. It's a way of reaching a part of my constituency I think has not typically been engaged in municipal politics. You might think that's the 40-and-under set, but in Tofino I find there is a wide variety of people of all ages that are using Facebook especially. Twitter I find a great way to reach out to the bigger world. And I really enjoy Twitter for the political side and learning about what other major centres are doing ... one of the themes I follow a lot is affordable housing to see what other towns are doing.

What about your future? Elizabeth May has said she'd love you as a Green candidate — do you see yourself in federal politics?

It's too soon, but never say never. I am hesitant about the deeply partisan politics at the provincial and federal levels. I feel really fortunate to be where I am at right now, because I'm the mayor of a very small town that has a very big profile. So I think I have a place from which to be an influence without having to join a political party. It's not a bad place to be. ■

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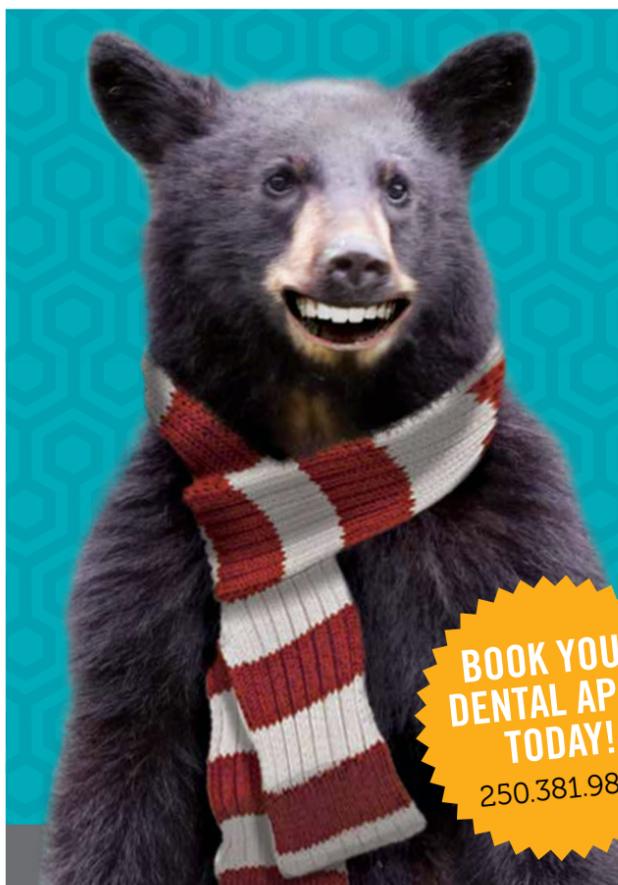


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