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VanMeter's passion called for surf, not turf

Joanne VanMeter's endorsement of Wichita probably isn't one the Chamber of Commerce will put on billboards.

VanMeter, who spent 16 years here and graduated from Bishop Carroll and Wichita State, had this to say about her experience:

"Living in Kansas allowed me time to concentrate on my studies that would otherwise have been spent on the beaches of California."

I can see it now: "Wichita -- Come Study With Us."

VanMeter, a southern California native who moved to Wichita with her widowed father when she was 12, found her way back to Carlsbad, Calif., just up the coast from San Diego, nine years ago and has become a world-class surfer.

Last year, she ranked No. 1 in her age group among women's shortboarders, and No. 2 among senior longboarders in the U.S. Surfing Association.

"Not bad for someone who spent half their life in Wichita and didn't even learn to surf until I was 32," VanMeter said.

VanMeter, 37, became hooked on the California lifestyle and climate during her first 11 years, before first moving to Plano, Texas, then to Wichita, where her father, Ray, still lives. She was a mountain biker, a roller blader and a tennis player who rarely saw the inside of her house, except to sleep.

She was a California Girl through and through.

"I always wonder what would have happened to me if I had never moved from California," VanMeter said. "I'm the type of person who just likes to hang out. And there was really nowhere I wanted to hang out in Wichita. I grew up being outside, 12 months out of the year. You really have to learn what to do with yourself in Wichita. So I was really a nerd. I studied.

"Gosh, I don't know if I should say that in the Wichita paper."

Don't worry, we have thick skin here. I think I speak for all Wichitans when I say how proud we are of our nerdishness.

VanMeter received a mechanical engineering degree from WSU and worked on the university's faculty for a time, as well as in jobs at Cessna and Boeing.

She spent a brief time in Atlanta, working for Lockheed Martin, before she and her husband, Don, whom she met at Wichita State, went west for a new challenge in the Internet market.

VanMeter works for Qualcomm, San Diego's largest employer, as an Internet programmer. But her life is so much more than work.

She's leaving in a week for Puerto Rico, and will island hop the Caribbean for multiple athletic adventures.

VanMeter remembers surfing only once as a kid. She didn't get the bug until taking a class after moving back to California.

"It wasn't very good instruction," she said. "The teacher gave us a suit and a board and told us to go out and surf. Then he abandoned us. I ended up kind of teaching myself."

VanMeter's love for the sport grew every time she went to the beach.

"I just loved it so much that I used surfing as a means of exercise and for having fun," she said. "After a while, your whole life becomes surfing. All of my friends now are surfers."

VanMeter rises early most mornings and heads for the beaches of Oceanside.

"I really have to work at not wanting to stay out there all day," she said. "Thank goodness I have a flexible job. But who in San Diego doesn't? We're funny here. We'll work late into the night if we have to do, but we don't come in until 10 a.m. at the earliest."

Riding waves gives VanMeter a feeling she never experienced in other sports.

"You never seem to be good enough," she said. "You always feel like you have to go one more time, ride one more wave because it's time to go to work. So you wait until you get that wave and it's been a half hour or an hour. Then you get it and it's so good that you want just one more."

VanMeter has surfed all over the world, including a 10-day boat trip to the Indian Ocean where she surfed in 80-degree clear water.

She is obviously where she belongs. But Wichitans will always be glad we could provide VanMeter some down time to crack the books.

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