

# INSPIRED

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APRIL 2016

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**Wild Child**  
**Vicki Gabereau**

“I get excited, all cranked up. I think it’s part of one’s wiring and, if you can learn to harness it, you can end up doing great things.”





Vicki Gabereau transformed herself after retirement – from an interviewer extraordinaire to an impassioned shoe maven.  
*Photos: Geoff Robson*

# Wild CHILD

BY JOHN THOMSON

**I**t's hard to imagine Canada's chat queen, the princess of gab and arguably British Columbia's favourite broadcaster was a bit of stinker in her early years, but there it is.

"I'm a show-off. I can't help it," admits Vicki Gabereau, the former host of *Gabereau* on CBC Radio for 12 years and CTV's *Gabereau Live* for eight, "and the more wild the situation gets, the wilder I get. It used to drive my mother crazy. 'Don't be so wild, Vicki,' she would tell me. Now when I look back on those things, the chances I took and the perilous situations I put myself in, I mean you gotta be a crazy person, but it all ended up quite well."

Quite well, indeed. Vicki is now firmly rooted in job number three... or four or five or six, depending upon when you start counting, as a West Vancouver shoe buyer for her good friend Marilyn Deligenti. Vicki keeps Marilyn's women's wear store, appropriately named Marilyn's of West Vancouver, well-stocked with the latest footwear. Vicki loves shoes!

"I've always been obsessed with shoes, even as a little kid," she confesses. "All my family has teased me about being obsessed with shoes, so when Marilyn said why don't we do shoes, I said 'I'm in.' I phoned the bank of my husband," she laughs, "and I started to buy shoes. I didn't buy into her business. I lease a space."

At first glance, they appear to be polar opposites. Vicki

seems capricious while Marilyn, the business woman, is grounded. Yet, they share a deep friendship, which began in high school and resurfaced decades later.

"We both follow each other around in our brains in this darting fashion and seem to keep up with each other. I think that may be the true source of our relationship," says Marilyn.

"We will go in one direction and then, immediately, like a dolphin, turn around in another direction and there's absolutely neither rhyme nor reason why it's gone this way," concurs Vicki.

"She'll say something rude to me and I'll say something rude to her," continues Marilyn. "People will say are you two fighting? Are you friends? Then I have to say that we like each other enormously."

Marilyn admits she was worried when Vicki retired completely from broadcasting in 2005.

"I said, you need to do something, Vicki. I don't know what you're doing. You don't like cleaning your house that much. I kept throwing different ideas at her and she just kept saying 'I don't like it' or 'I don't want to do that. I'm happy doing nothing.' And I said that's just ridiculous. It went on like that for a few years and I was getting nowhere. I finally said what about shoes?"

"I love shoes," repeats Vicki. "When the new shipments

# Snapshot

with Vicki Gabereau

If you were to meet yourself at age 20, what advice would you give yourself?

*"Stop this madness. Pay attention. Go to university and do something useful. That's what I think after all these years. It was pretty wild."*

Who or what has influenced you the most? And why?

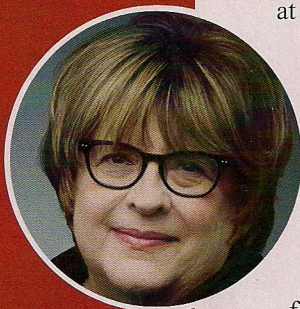
*"Pierre Berton, Jack Webster, my father. They all had encyclopedic memories and I got it. The more you know, the more you want to know. You just get hungrier and hungrier to know stuff. You can't not know stuff. You gotta have it cleared up. It's like a drug. I want to know."*

What does courage mean to you?

*"Courage comes from facing a life issue. It means not panicking about the future. Face it. Deal with it. Next."*

What does success mean to you?

*"It means doing what you like to do and having somebody give you money to do it," she laughs. "You want to spend your days doing something that intrigues you."*



come in, I get so excited I can hardly stand it." And as an added bonus, she pops into the store from time to time to chat up the customers.

"This store is sort of like a little club," she continues. "We have an area at the front called Front Office and we sit around and hear about everybody's children and look at this picture and that picture. It's chit-chatty. I wanted to be social and I like meeting women and they like to talk. I don't have to prove anything to them," she says of her new-found fan base. "All I have to do is respect their little feet."

Not that she didn't enjoy her earlier career as the host of her own radio and TV shows. Her 30+ year career garnered tons of awards and a place in Canada's Broadcaster Hall of Fame. "I did it for a long time and I pretty well loved every minute of it," she says proudly.

"I started in 1975 on a small radio station in Brampton, Ontario," she continues. She says she went into radio because it was the only thing she knew. "I grew up with people who were on the CBC and I understood how it worked." Her father's best friend was writer and broadcaster Pierre Berton whom he met at an officer's training camp during WWII. Berton was to have a profound influence on Vicki's life.

"I watched everybody work in that business and, to me, that's what you did. Obviously, I wasn't going to be a doctor because I didn't finish high school and I believe you need that," she laughs, "[in order] to go to medical school. I would have liked to be a nurse or a doctor, but I had no discipline."

She did, by the way, return to high school, but the early days, by her own admission, were chaotic.

Vicki Fillion grew up in Kerrisdale, a tony, middle-class part of Vancouver. The family relocated to Vancouver Island and eventually to West Vancouver. Her father, Harry Fillion, was a press photographer with the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper and when he wasn't working at the paper, he was supporting the family photo studio doing portraiture by appointment and weddings on the weekends. Vicki's Mom, Veryl, ran the shop.

"She was the business mind," says Vicki. Working the family business meant long hours for Mom and Dad and, as an only child, young Vicki was raised largely by her grandmother.

"They were fun, my parents. I had a wonderful life with them and my grandmother; she lived with us. It was a million laughs, but they got very upset with me because I wasn't paying attention to my studies. In social studies, I got 98%. In math, I got 2%. If I liked it, I paid attention, but I wouldn't concentrate on things I didn't get. I couldn't focus. I wanted out."

"And then, apparently, my father said to my mother, don't worry about it, she's going to grow up and get married anyway. My mother went ballistic and practically screwed herself into the ceiling and said 'how dare you say such a thing. We just can't abandon her,' so he phoned Pierre and said 'she's driving me nuts,' and Pierre said 'I'll take her.' So, I got on the train, my father handed me another 200 bucks and said don't drink gin. The minute I got on the train, I got a drink with gin in it, a pink lady."

Now 18, Vicki Fillion found herself as a guest of the Berton family in Kleinberg, north of Toronto. The Bertons sent her back to school and unwittingly introduced her to her future husband, Michel Gabereau, at one of their many fundraisers.

"It was a fundraiser for the Harold King Farm, a half-way house for guys out of jail," says Vicki. Michel Gabereau, a magician, was the featured entertainer. They dated, married and, by the time she was 23, Vicki had given birth to son, Morgan, and daughter, Eve.

A succession of small jobs followed. She worked as a street vendor selling Indonesian clothing, as an actress in a soft-core porn movie – "I played the wife. I was paid to keep my clothes on," – and a professional clown with an entertainment company called Puck Rent-a-Fool. After all, she wasn't qualified for anything but, no matter, she was happy. And resourceful. When her husband Michel, by then a sound recordist with CTV, went on strike, she joined him driving cab.

"You have to deal with some weird characters," she remembers. "It made my mother confess," says Vicki. "She said

it was a good thing you did all those things because you found out about the world and you probably wouldn't be as interested in the work you do now, if you hadn't done that."

In 1974, while still employed at Puck Rent-a-Fool, she ran for mayor of Toronto as professional clown, Rosy Sunrise. Just for the heck of it. She didn't win, but she did make her mark. In one poll, she received two or three more votes than the local incumbent.

"The expressions on their faces as they were counting up the ballots – 'can this be happening?' – so funny. I wish I had been there," she says. "I was very interested in the fringe, in the underbelly and who was crazier than the next guy," she says of those early days, "but I mean functionally crazy. What sparks some people to do what they do, accomplish musical brilliance or artistry in any field? All the great people I've talked to have a little element of cuckoo."

When asked if she thinks she may have been a little cuckoo herself in those days, she replies with a story about addiction expert Gabor Mate and Attention Deficit Disorder.

"About a million years ago, I had Gabor Mate on my TV show. He's written about this. At the end, we're talking and I say, you know what, Gabor? My daughter says I have [ADD] and he looks at me in his measured way and says 'oh, you do.' I didn't do it to defy convention; I did it because it sounded like a swell idea. I get excited, all cranked up. I think it's part of one's wiring and, if you can learn to harness it, you can end up doing great things."

Her radio pal, Bill Richardson, agrees. Initially hired to book guests, Richardson eventually became Vicki's on-air sidekick and a radio personality in his own right.

"She would take quite mediocre work, such as a prepared script, and make it way better than it was just by being herself," he remembers. "Funny and irreverent and plain old smart. Respectful yes, reverent, not so much. It wasn't her job to be reverent."

Undisciplined as a child, Vicki hit the books as an adult, hunkering down to prepare for the upcoming interview. True, she was driven by a fear of embarrassing herself and her guest on air, but it never showed. "There were a lot of times I was afraid," she says. "That's the lack of an educational background."

"She was doing as many as four long interviews a day, perhaps with a particle physicist one minute and a children's book illustrator the next," says Richardson. "On balance she did it supremely well. She understood what it meant to be a host, to create a space at the table for whoever's arrived. She was a standard bearer," he continues, "not just for women in broadcasting but for anyone who wanted to do the sort of work she did, the long-form interview, and do it well. I really think it's shocking that she's never been given the Order of Canada."

Happily settled into a new career as a shoe maven, Vicki says she doesn't miss her former talk-show life. The work? No. The camaraderie with her crew? Yes. And maybe the notoriety. "I like walking down the street with people smiling at me. I was never keen on anonymity," she admits

"I like to be quiet now. I like to sit at home and read." Long divorced from her first husband, she married long-time partner

Tom Rowe, a Vancouver-based film producer, in 2007. Her extended family includes a step-daughter from Tom, her own children, Morgan and Eve, and four grandchildren. She's written an autobiography, *This Won't Hurt a Bit*, and a cookbook and is busy with several philanthropic causes: the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs, Ovarian Cancer Canada and Jacqui Cohen's Face the World Foundation, which raises money for the disadvantaged.

"Words of wisdom? I don't have much wisdom. I have a limited future and a lot of past." Her past, she admits, ironically, bothered her children, at least at first, in much the same way her own unconventional behaviour bothered her mother decades ago.

"I think my children would have been happier if I had just been knitting squares in the corner," she muses. "I was so misguided and ambitious and crazy. It was pretty wild. It's better to have a normal mother. They don't want them putting a bunch of white stuff on their face and running around in a wig. It's not good to have a crazy mother. It really isn't."

But it's all good now. Morgan and Eve, their respective partners and Vicki's grandchildren all live in England and she flies across the pond once a year to see them.

"I'm a happy person," she says. "I'm married to a wonderful man. I was married to a very good man. I have two great children and a great step-daughter who calls me wicked. I'm not beleaguered by poverty or ill health; it doesn't get much better than that." *SEL*



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