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Columbia Gorge Quality of Life Lures Two Intel Refugees to Positions with Fast-Growing Maker of Electronic Cables

BINGEN, Wash. (March 24, 2011) — Starting at the same source, Jane Beatty and Jeff Nicol followed similar meandering paths between the Oregon operations of Intel Corp. and their current positions at Custom Interface in the heart of the Columbia River Gorge.

Going from a corporation with 16,000 Oregon employees to a small but rapidly growing corporation of 110 employees begs the question: Why?

Two reasons, similar for both Beatty and Nicol. It was about all the things they like to do away from work. And it was about reinventing their professional lives, biting off new challenges in a fertile environment for small technology companies.

Beatty, who started as vice president of human resources and is now president, takes over the reins from company founder and chief executive officer Nancy White. White is shifting into semi-retirement. She herself was drawn to the Columbia River Gorge and started the company in 1997 because it would keep her close to back roads biking and windsurfing.

When Beatty seven years ago moved an hour east of her job at Intel, it wasn't to join Custom Interface. It was mainly about getting to a better place.

"I needed to have a place that fed my soul, where I wasn't in the hubbub of the high pressure corporate world," she says. "Nature is a huge draw here. It's a spiritual thing."

When she decided to make the move, she figured she could telecommute or drive. And did, until she quit Intel, and took a couple of years off before joining Custom Interface in 2009. Now she's a full-time local, and even more appreciative now than when she first arrived.

"The scenery is spectacular," she says. "I hike every day, a good 90-minute hike. Sometimes I take my dog. You just find something that fits, and this is what you do. It's like getting up and brushing my teeth: I go for a hike."

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She says her neighbors in White Salmon and Bingen and across the river in Hood River all share a passionate love for their world astride the mighty Columbia. Some were some born and raised in the Gorge. Others chose to make it home. Nicol is one.

After 12 years at Intel, he started a data privacy consultancy in 2002. He and his wife, Cindi Pedersen, still lived in Portland, but had started spending weekends in the Gorge. When she landed a job in 2006 with Renaissance Learning – an educational software publisher in Hood River – they moved for good to Hood River.

In November 2010, Nicol took a position as chief financial officer at Custom Interface. It was a far more attractive choice than what he saw ahead of him if he wanted to grow his company, Privacy Ready. More hiring. More travel. More time away from family and a place he has come to love.

“We're into steelhead fishing, we dabble in windsurfing,” says Nicol, who serves on the Hood River City Council. “I wanted to stay here and be local and have a short commute, and not be on an airplane. We like the smaller town, all the good restaurants, the wineries, the hiking and snowshoeing.”

And, like Beatty, he likes the opportunity to help a successful company through its next growth phase. Beatty says Custom Interface – it builds electronic cables, connectors and assemblies – has grown sales by 30 percent and employment from around 65 in early 2010. Customers include solar, auto, aerospace and medical equipment makers.

“It's been tremendous to see steady growth during a down economic time,” Beatty says. “The challenge is to make sure business processes are in place and solid so you can bring on more people.”

For assembly positions, she has no problem hiring from the local labor pool. “Where you get into degreed positions, where you're pulling from finance, sales, engineering, I wouldn't say I have a hard time, but I do tend to throw the net a little wider,” she says. “For the most part, we find that word of mouth gets it done.”

Word of mouth got it done for Nicol, through his involvement with the Gorge Technology Alliance.

“Dropping back into the office environment, it's fun,” he says. “There are an interesting, diverse mix of people.”

Beatty loves the diverse mix of home-grown and immigrant talents. She notes how multi-generational fruit orchardists live side by side with immigrant small farmers of specialty crops. The same holds true of tech entrepreneurs.

“It's a wonderful mix of old and new, simple and complex,” she says. “And there's a camaraderie in the community, a helpfulness, a small town charm to it, without being podunk.”

“In general, you find happier people here. They're more content, better balanced. You get this enormous feeling of neighborhood friendliness. It's addictive.”

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