

At the Summit:

The Families that Make the Tower Climb for Wilderness a Success

By Nick Pink, *AWA Conservation Specialist*, and Polly Knowlton Cockett

On a typical day the Calgary Tower, a behemoth of concrete and steel, likely isn't the first place you think of when you imagine the wilderness, wildlife, and water of Alberta. But something special happened on Earth Day (April 22) every year from 1992 until 2016; the wilderness came to the tower. This last year more than 1,000 participants and 150 volunteers migrated to the Calgary Tower to make their annual trek up the 802 steps to the top while learning, sharing, and promoting awareness of Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA). While all donors and supporters are greatly appreciated as the driving force of AWA's activities, some go far above and beyond the call of duty. In recognition of these exceptional supporters, AWA bestows an annual Margaret and Jerry Hall Award for the Most Outstanding Family.

The Award is about more than fundraising. "It's about the participation and when you are doing it with a family it's a notion that it's an activity or an engagement that the entire family can be involved in some way," says Polly Knowlton Cockett, whose family received the award in 2009. Recipients share a year-after-year commitment to

the event and a passion for wild spaces and wildlife.

To date nine families have claimed the Margaret and Jerry Hall Award for the Most Outstanding Family. They are:

Year	Family
2016	Darcy Pearson and Family
2015	Heather, Robb, Abigail, and Raymond Hadden Kirsten, David, Michael, and Annika Pugh
2014	Tony and Liz Fricke and family
2013	Patti Dibski, Bill, Sam, and Alex Overend
2012	Erin Grier, Joe, Willa and Sadie Vipond
2011	Patti Dibski, Bill, Sam, and Alex Overend
2010	Cathy Scott, Gord, Ailsa and Gareth Hobbins
2009	Robin, Rowan, Grayson, Audrey Lane Cockett and Polly Knowlton Cockett
2008	Ed Hergott and Family - 18 family members climbed and volunteered at this year's climb!

Why do they do it?

The Tower Climb is a unique event. "It's different" Liz Fricke recalled. "So many outfits have a run or a walk...and people regard it as a challenge, it's actually fun to see how many times you can do it. Liz, husband Tony, and their family received the 2014 Award.

For some supporters, involvement with the climb came directly from their work with AWA. Ed Hergott, patriarch of the 2008 award recipients, has volunteered with AWA since he retired from teaching in 1996. The Association quickly discovered the talent they had on their hands and asked Ed to help coordinate the Tower Climb in 1997. They've never looked back; Ed has been successfully coordinating the Climb for almost 20 years. Ed told Polly: "I gather a group of about 25 of us. And we're the guys that are in the tower, as you come up the various levels, and we direct traffic at the base, and we run the elevators. Plus, I'm Christyann's (Executive Director of AWA) eyes on the scene."

For others, the challenge of getting up those 802 stairs got them started. "I wanted to see if I could make it to the top" says



Margaret and Jerry Hall
PHOTO: © K. MIHALCHEON



Ed Hergott
PHOTO: © J. QUIROZ



The Hadden Family (with Nana Olson)
PHOTO: © J. QUIROZ



Liz (right) and Tony (left) Fricke and Family (centre)



Gareth, Ailsa, and Gord Hobbins

Kalen Pearson whose family won the award in 2016. She adds “now it’s to support a good cause”.

Heather, of the 2015 Award co-recipient Hadden family, has participated for so long that it has become part of her family’s yearly traditions. “I don’t know when we started. It’s just something that we’ve always done. It’s just part of what we do.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, for many of these outstanding families, the activity is about family and friends. Kirsten Pugh’s family shared the award with the Haddens in 2015. Kirsten, a past AWA Board Member, recalls: “We had participated – I worked for Cenovus-Encana – there was a fellow who organized the teams, and we just participated through that. [Once Encana and Cenovus split in 2010], I took it upon myself to organize the Cenovus teams. I’ve been doing that since 2010. And the kids have always done it.”

Gord Hobbins, father of the family that received the 2010 Award, checks off all the boxes: “[My son] Gareth would like it because he’s of an age where he likes to show people what he’s capable of from a physical perspective. Our daughter, it’s a win-win situation, she’s been always the one to... if it has an environmental or positive spin on it, she’s the one who puts the flag up and says wait a minute, ok I think we can walk to this place, we don’t have to take the car.”

But why support AWA?

Ed Hergott, Tower Aid & Base Crew Coordinator and all-around MVP, originally took notice of AWA through his interest in outdoor activities along the eastern slopes. “The eastern slopes were a big issue and the AWA

bit hard on it for the protection of those areas and the watershed and the animals and the wilderness. Then Lougheed came in and set aside Kananaskis Country [Provincial Park] and all kinds of protections that had never been there. And so that was just an enormous step forward. And the issues continue, logging and gas and oil and all that.”

Erin Grier explains her support this way: “I think what’s been a key to our support of the AWA is our connection to nature and to wild places that my family spends a lot of time, in the mountains, helping our kids understand the importance of being connected to those places.” Erin received the 2012 Award, along with her partner Joe Vipond (now an AWA board member) and their children Sadie and Willa. “And,” Erin adds, “it’s better than an amusement park! You can see so many amazing and cool things.”

Liz Fricke cites and appreciates AWA’s education mandate: “What they do is they keep you informed in what’s actually happening, which is not easy to do, and their research seems pretty good. Because there’s been lots of areas that people haven’t known what’s going on.”

The Climb sounds like a great time!

As with any annual event, each year provides a lesson for what was done well and what could use improvement. What keeps people coming back?

“[We] like everything about the climb, especially doing it as a family,” says Darcy Pearson. Kirsten Pugh echoes this sentiment: “The kids love it, so it just becomes one of those traditions. And now for them, it’s this thing we always do.”

“It’s so much nicer since they put all those murals in there,” says Polly Knowlton Cockett, “When we were first doing [the Climb], it was drab. They’ve really upped the atmosphere so that it’s fun, and it’s fun at the top.”

Twenty-five years of success and improvement have polished the event into what it is today. But there are always a few wrinkles to iron out. When asked what they didn’t like about the climb, Sam and Alex Overend, whose family has won the award twice (2011 and 2013), had a few thoughts to share. “The lines to get into the elevator [can be too long],” offered Bill Overend’s eldest son, Sam. “When people come down the stairs when you are coming up. Or the really, really competitive people that push people.”

“Getting up early,” adds Alex, Bill’s youngest.

It seems only fitting that individual families have played such an impressive role in the strengthening of the AWA family over the years. Families such as those recognized with the Margaret and Jerry Hall Award have been and remain a tremendous source of support for AWA.

The plans for the 2017 Climb for Wilderness mean that we’re moving to the Bow Building after 25 years at the Calgary Tower. Our new venue has even more stairs and an even greater view from the top. What we hope never changes is the warmth and excitement that AWA’s families bring to our celebration of Earth Day. 🌱

A special thanks to Polly Knowlton Cockett for taking the time to interview all of the recipient families.



Patti Dibski, Bill, Sam, and Alex Overend PHOTO: © J. QUIROZ



Erin Grier, Joe, Willa, and Sadie Vipond



Audrey Lane, Rowan, Robin, and Grayson Cockett, and Polly Knowlton Cockett



The Pearson family PHOTO: © K. MIHALCHEON