

From prairie school to MBA classroom

What made Ryan Harder quit teaching in a religious community to attend a Canadian business school?

I really enjoy money. I enjoy “stuff” and spending money, of course, but I am fascinated by currency — one of humanity’s greatest achievements. It is something we all intuitively understand and we do not really appreciate how unifying it is.

Before the decision to move into asset management, I taught for six years in a community school on a Hutterite Anabaptist Christian colony in the Canadian prairie province of Saskatchewan. About 100 people lived in the community, where they mainly speak a language derived from German. I was not brought up in their faith, I was raised Lutheran, but the colonies always have one teacher from the outside.

Other than peoples’ homes, most of the buildings were communal, from an industrial-sized laundry to a kitchen and dining area. I fell in love with community teaching. The students were curious, lively, welcoming and respectful, which was far from the norm for teaching at public schools.

People often think of wealth managers as coin-stacking bankers high up in a city tower. But there are extremely important financial decisions to be made even on a Hutterite colony in northern Saskatchewan. Perhaps most importantly, once the colony grows too large (perhaps

around 140 people) it will need to purchase new land, buildings and equipment to create a new colony. In my opinion, one of the most important aspects of Hutterite life is the accumulation of wealth, to ensure that their communities can continue to grow and thrive, and to ensure the future of their way of life.

Deciding to leave teaching was a fairly slow process. I have career attention-deficit disorder and I just want to try different things. My work as a teacher was extremely important, but there was next to no risk. Close to a few per cent, I could calculate how much money I would make for the rest of my life. I could see myself getting old and complacent and I wanted a bit of “eat what you kill”.

It started as a curiosity: just watching television and realising I was really interested in stocks. Then I started reading the accounting textbooks of my girlfriend at the time, who was studying commerce. Soon after, I enrolled in the Chartered Financial Analyst programme. I made an agreement with myself that if I still enjoyed it after the second level I would consider it as a career choice. I wrote the first test in 2013 and the last one three years later, in between I decided to make the switch happen.

I looked at schools around the world, but ultimately I knew I wanted to stay in Canada. I am just built for the weather and I love this place. I applied to a few different MBA programmes, but Ivey Business School at Western University, Ontario, had what I needed. One of the things I kept hearing about Ivey was how generous the network is, and that was something I wanted to be part of — I wanted to take and to give. The school is also ranked well, has good employment stats and the class is much smaller than at other schools. I wanted to have a strong connection with my classmates, which is absolutely happening.

We are around 150 students. Some 40 per cent are international, but a lot of the Canadian students were either born somewhere else or their parents were immigrants. People here just do not look like me and I enjoy that.

During the MBA I learnt how to speak about myself. As a teacher I did not have to be literate in selling myself — once you are in, you are in and you can stop. I came into the MBA with imposter syndrome; I felt like the dumbest guy in the room. But after about five weeks I realised ‘I can do this’. The biggest learning for me was confidence, realising I actually do have a lot of value to add.

I have been fortunate to receive an offer as wealth management generalist at the Royal Bank of Canada. It is a rotational programme and it feels as if it was designed for me — this weird teacher from Saskatoon with a lot of theoretical knowledge but no experience. It offers six months rotations in different parts of wealth and asset management and I will be starting in the summer. Before the MBA I had a few targets in mind in terms of jobs and RBC was plan A. I am very excited to have such an opportunity.

For me, wealth and asset management is a fascinating industry. It’s something that connects all of us, from communal farmers in rural Saskatchewan to high frequency algorithmic traders in Manhattan. **BB**

As told to Patricia Nilsson

New direction
Ryan Harder on
a study trip to
Hong Kong

