



## PROFILE

THE  
LOW  
DOWN



## KELLY VANDERBEEK & DAVID FORD

An Olympic couple connects with youth around the country—and the country itself

BY DAVID WEBB

**F**ans of the Winter Olympics likely know Kelly VanderBeek. The retired Team Canada alpine ski racer—a World Cup medalist and Olympian—is now a staple on CBC, recently having co-hosted the overnight coverage of the PyeongChang games. She's also an in-demand keynote speaker and emcee, which is why she was invited as a special guest aboard a One Oceans Expeditions cruise into Canada's high Arctic last summer. Her goal was to connect with not only OOE guests, but members of the Inuit communities of Baffin Island—speaking to youth about her experiences and relating to their own. But she wasn't going alone.

**ABOVE:** VanderBeek and Ford speak to a youth group in Pond Inlet, Nunavut; Kayaking off Devon Island, Nunavut.

Team at the age of 17. He's competed in five Olympic Games, was the first non-European to win a World Championship title, earned an overall win at the World Cup and won multiple World Cup medals. He hung up his competition paddle at the age of 50, his career touching four decades.

With VanderBeek broadcasting, Ford consulting and both raising their son, Cooper, in Canmore, Alberta, the couple has a lot on their plates. But the chance to travel north and speak to Inuit youth was so enticing they cleared their schedules—Ford even wedging it into his final days of career competition. Inspiring youth through public speaking has been a longtime

passion of the pair—dating to when they were youth themselves.

"I made the national team when I was 17 and I did a talk at my own school right afterwards," explained Ford, an admitted introvert. Ford fights through the fear to get his message across, while VanderBeek is more of a natural.

"I'm an extrovert. I love hearing their stories and telling mine," she says. Fear and doubt is, however, a topic they both frequently discuss.

"I face misconceptions about champions. So that's often something I speak about—that champions look a certain way, or that they are all confident, outgoing, A-type personalities.... Or that they never wanted to quit and always knew what they were going to do. No! I was going to be an artist... And I wanted to quit many times," said VanderBeek.

This forms a common thread for how the pair connects authentically with youth—discussing techniques for overcoming doubt and chatting about the pursuit of unlikely success. After all, Ford is from Edmonton, Alberta—a city without whitewater—and VanderBeek is from

Kapusking, Ontario—a town without mountains.

"Kelly's sport is essentially dominated by Europeans. My sport is absolutely dominated by Europeans. We're unlikely," said Ford. "I tell [kids]—I became World Champion, but it was hard. I overcame my challenges. I'm not some shiny guy. I have a lot of mud on me."

Their recent Arctic tour was unique in location, but not theme. The pair participates in fellow Olympian Beckie Scott's Ski Fit North, a program that teaches cross-country skiing—and ultimately healthy living, well-being and confidence—to Aboriginal youth.

"I'm not a cross-country skier, so when the kids see this world champion Olympic guy falling on his butt on cross-country skis, that has a way of connecting with them on another level," said Ford.

On top of that, VanderBeek is an ambassador with Right to Play and speaks to young girls through Fast and Female, an organization that empowers girls aged eight to 18 through sport.

"My local school asked me to speak to their kindergarten to grade six classes on a motivational day—to talk about fear... saying it's OK to be scared," she said. "It blows me away how quickly you can connect with youth. Authenticity is the most important part."

Last summer's trip into the Nunavut Archipelago was also a chance to achieve some personal goals.

"This is where kayaking started. I was thinking a lot about that connection and what it means to me," explained Ford.

"I'm a proud Canadian. But I was missing a piece of my Canadianess," said VanderBeek. "Coming up [north] makes me feel like a piece of my national identity has been put in place." ✕

TOP: KELLY VANDERBEEK; INSET: EHREN WEINER/ONE OCEAN EXPEDITIONS