

CONNECTING

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# *the Sound*

## **Connecting with the Stewart Family**

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Cover Photo by John  
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# Connecting with the Stewart Family

By Bobby Hooper | Photos by John White Photography

When you first meet Alek and Brittany and hear their story, you can't help but think of the "laws of attraction." When you look up "laws of attraction," generally, 3 or 7 laws appear in the search engine, among many that include "whatever you focus on daily manifests in one's life," the "law of magnetism," the "law of delicate balance". But one stands out: like attracts like.

This is a couple that seems to have been brought together over a time that stretches into a couple of decades. They met in public school, Brittany, in grade four, Alek, in grade five. Of course, they knew of each other, but that was the extent of their relationship at an early age. Then came high school in Orangeville, and while they became friends, there were no real sparks, at least not conscious ones. Both were heavily involved in sports at the high school level, and like typical teenagers, weekends found themselves immersed in teenage get-togethers and the odd shenanigans. Alek quickly admits that he was the class clown, doing whatever he could to make someone laugh. The sparkle in his eye when he relays a few high school memories reveals that side of him is still in there. Brittany says they had mutual friends and what was at the core of their friendship was that although they had separate groups of friends, they both had an ability to get along with everybody, form relationships that were devoid of anger or judgement, and generally have a good time. Without knowing it at the time, this was the beginning of the law of attraction: like attracts like.

A life-altering event for Alek took place at his parents' house when he was 16. A group of friends just hanging out in Alek's basement, having fun, turned very dark in the hours leading up to breakfast. Alek

was experiencing a physical phenomenon that one can only describe as terrifying. He had no control over his left arm, he felt a sense of losing control of his body, anxiety, an inability to breathe and other more gruesome sensations. Since nobody was old enough to drive, a quick call to older brother resulted in a trip to emerg where a doctor first raised the suspicion of epilepsy. Months of testing finally led to the diagnosis: life would never be the same. Like most people, perhaps especially teenage boys, Alek shrugged it off. Perhaps from youthful ignorance to the severity of the situation, and partially from an inner thought of stigma, what will my friends say, how will they react and on it goes. Nobody knew except his family. You carry on, deal with the nightmare that at any time, another seizure could happen and see what else life brings. So after years of saying happy birthday to each other and keeping in touch, Brittany moved to Barrie to go to school at Georgian, where she attained her Diploma in Massage Therapy. After a trip with her sister to discover Europe for a few weeks, she returned home to start her career. A chance conversation with a mutual friend a few days later reminiscing about high school brought up Alek's name. It was at this time Brittany learned of Alek's health challenge. She reached out to him via MSN (our younger readers won't have a clue what that is!), and the two decided to meet. It wasn't long after that they were dating and embarking on a remarkable journey.

Both had careers - Alek living in the GTA, Brittany back in Orangeville - but something was not sitting well with their collective psyches of the hubbub of city life. Both come from families that have cottages in the area (Southampton and Tobermory), so Grey Bruce and it's beauty was not a novel experience for them. The couple decided to check



the area out and see what might be available. Alek readily admits he has a fascination with realtor.ca and says he started doing research for their new home. It didn't take long for them to find their present home on Grey Road 18 near the Coffin Ridge Winery. Alek admits that living on the 17th floor in North Toronto gave you a great view...if the picture of a cityscape was your thing...it wasn't his. When I asked what they loved about the Grey-Bruce area, there was no hesitation in either of their responses. Alek talks about a story of his Dad calling him about a meteor shower that was to be spectacular, and the best viewing would be at about one in the morning. Alek sets his alarm, gets up, walks out on the balcony and realizes there is so much light pollution that not only can one not see the meteor shower or the milky way, but the moon itself was difficult to pick out. That moment may have been the tipping

point to get serious about the move. Brittany agreed and says that now when they go to Toronto for an event (usually a concert as they are avid concert-goers) they are constantly reminded why they left. A shared interest in local hockey has resulted in the pair and their nine-month-old daughter Charley being season ticket holders for the Attack. However, their involvement in the community they now call home does not end there. Brittany now owns a Massage Therapy Clinic, Sydenham Health and Wellness, on 1st Ave West that hosts several health and wellness experts. Alek, on the other hand, has decided to devote his life to bringing awareness to epilepsy to the local community. When you talk to Alek about his epilepsy everything changes; the tone of voice, body language, facial expression and even the words he chooses...and for good reason. The effects the disease has on people varies with each

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individual, but there is a common thread. What started out as one or two controlled seizures per year (grand mal) for about six years has evolved into multiple petit mal seizures per month for the last five years. He now suffers from 30-40 myoclonic jerks per day. Until one experiences any disease, one cannot comprehend how it changes day to day life. Simple things we take for granted are now off limits: for example, swimming in the bay is no longer an option.

What is remarkable, however, is how upbeat the two are about his diagnosis. Alek even commented that he is fortunate to have a disease that is somewhat controllable but has given him new understanding and appreciation of many other diseases such as depression, anxiety and even concussion syndromes. Each invisible to the naked eye, but very real nonetheless. All carry a certain amount of stigma. It should be of no surprise to anyone that meets Brittany and Alek that they have done the research and identified a huge void in the local area for raising awareness and offering support via their multimedia forums and sites. About 1% of Canadians are diagnosed with epilepsy; meaning that approximately 1,700-1,800 in Grey and Bruce County alone will have been diagnosed, with the closest support centre being located in London. It's a commendable effort. Alek felt that just by putting his story out there publicly, it would not only raise awareness but offer a platform for others to come forward and share their stories, fears, experience and knowledge. You can read more in the last months "featured charity" section.

The Grey-Bruce area has always held a special place in their collective hearts. The second week of September for the last nine years has found the couple visiting the family cottage in Tobermory. It was there that Alek proposed to Brittany 8 years ago, and it was there they were married six years ago. They have a seven-year-old Boxer named Cove after Cove Island. Alek remembers how he was so struck by the tranquillity of the waves crashing on the shoreline, which became the soundtrack to "the most beautiful sunsets" he had ever seen. Perhaps this is when the law of attraction began.

At their present home, the view is spectacular. Watching weather fronts move in from afar, or spectacular sunrises in the morning (they both have always been morning people) are constant reminders as to why they made a move to our (now their) area of the world. It can be astonishing to think we as a community get to see the Milky Way on every clear night...an experience most city dwellers only know from books. We take it for granted; it's refreshing to hear that after three years as our neighbours, those experiences, those views still bring joy and awe to the Stewarts. Their family motto is one of optimism. No kidding. This couple pours their very hearts into all that they do. You would have to overcome, live with and challenge yourself to accept the cards that life has dealt with. In fact, just like the view from their front porch, it has made them remarkable in their own way. They have turned what most see as negative into a mission of kindness and support to their new

community. Do they have bad days? Yes, but optimism allows oneself to count the good days, focus on the good days, rather than dwell on the bad days. After all, the good outweighs the bad, always. Should you see them out working in the yard as you drive by, you will notice they almost always wave and smile. Why, to these two, it could be that wave or smile that makes someone's day that changes it from a bad day to a good day: Optimism at work at the micro-level. To Brittany and Alek, a wave is a small thing, but just like the waves rolling onto the shoreline, it just might be soothing.

So when you meet these two, you can't help but like their energy and positivity. It's infectious. You'll find yourself talking to them like you have known them all your life...and wish you had. You will also be made very aware: like attracts like.



Do you know a neighbour who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbour to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at [njohnstone@bestversionmedia.com](mailto:njohnstone@bestversionmedia.com).

