



## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

August 3, 2012

### Lululemon billionaire ready to chip in for Vancouver

By MARSHA LEDERMAN

*Lululemon put Vancouver on the international retail map and made founder Chip Wilson a billionaire. Now he says he is done with making money and is focusing on giving back to his city*

Being a billionaire (and then some) can offer more freedom than even the stretchiest of yoga pants.

If you're Lululemon Athletica founder Chip (born Dennis) Wilson and his wife, Shannon, you can pay to keep a beloved work of public art in place, build a \$37-million mansion, offer to help extend the seawall to your own tony neighbourhood, and you have the ability to speak up frankly if you don't like a particular direction your city is taking.

And make no mistake, Vancouver is their city: the city that made Lululemon possible, the city that made them very, very rich, and the city they say they will continue to call home.

"Vancouver is everything," said Mr. Wilson on Wednesday, a frantic day of back-to-back meetings for the couple before jetting off to London to take in the Olympics. "It's like nowhere else in the world."

The Wilsons are contributing both money and opinions, working to keep Vancouver in line with their vision: a green (in every way) place where people can lead healthy, meaningful lives in a spectacular setting.

If their gift this summer of \$1.5-million to keep a popular installation by Chinese artist Yue Minjun at English Bay signalled the arrival of an important new wallet on the local cultural philanthropy scene, the Wilsons see it differently.

They don't, they say, slot their giving into categories – health, education, art.

"We were moved to participate with the [Vancouver] Biennale in *A-maze-ing Laughter* because we just saw how it draws people out. It draws them down to the beach. It gets people on the seawall. It makes them silly," Mrs. Wilson said.

"What we really bought was 50-million smiles over the next 20 years," Mr. Wilson added.

On philanthropy, they have trademarked the term "creattribution," encouraging fundraising through creative measures rather than just asking people for cash.

They hint at more charitable initiatives to come, including money for universities to benefit Vancouver's technical clothing industry. Next spring they'll roll out a new initiative – WHIL – offering "a new way of looking at meditation." WHIL is a play on the will to do something, the word "where," and their name.

It will not be a profit-making venture. "We're doing nothing to make money," Mr. Wilson said. "The beautiful thing about us [is] we don't need money anymore. So it's all about just giving back to the world."

Vancouver's New Age philanthropic power couple both come from somewhere else: Mr. Wilson, 57, from Alberta (he was born in California and moved to Calgary when he was five); and Mrs. Wilson, 38, from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. via Regina.

They met in late 1999, when Lululemon was a fledgling company. She applied for a designer job, having run her own athletic clothing venture.

"I was a substitute teacher and a struggling business owner and I needed a bigger paycheque," said Mrs. Wilson, who designed clothing but in those early days also packed boxes, cleaned toilets – and served as CEO for a time.

To say she got that bigger paycheque (eventually) is an understatement. Lululemon has become ubiquitous – and you don't have to do yoga to wear it. In March, a few weeks after Mr. Wilson stepped down as Lululemon's Chief Innovation and Branding Officer (he remains board chair), Forbes ranked him as Canada's ninth wealthiest person, with a net worth of \$2.9-billion.

The company has put Vancouver on the international retail map. "How many of us when we're travelling around the world say, 'Chip Wilson and Lululemon, that's in Vancouver?'" said condo marketer Bob Rennie, another wealthy, philanthropic Vancouverite. "We boast Lululemon as a regional asset."

The phenomenon would not have happened, the Wilsons say, without Vancouver – and on a more micro level, Kitsilano. This is the neighbourhood where Mr. Wilson took his first yoga class in 1997, and where the couple is building a house – assessed at \$37.2-million – on Point Grey Road (the more quaint 4-bedroom property next door is on the market, listed at \$15.8-million). Construction is behind schedule, so they'll spend a few months in Australia. The family (five boys: six-year-old twins, an eight-year-old, and from Mr. Wilson's previous marriage a 22- and 23-year old) also has homes in Whistler and the Sunshine Coast.

The Wilsons credit the Kits lifestyle with inspiring and supporting the Lulu vision: attractive, stretchy, sweat-hostile pieces that the yoga practitioner also feels good in after class, as she grabs her soy latte.

"Lululemon couldn't have set up in another city and been successful," Mr. Wilson said.

When word surfaced this summer that an anonymous donor was offering the city millions to extend the seawall from Kits Beach to Jericho Beach, chatter immediately turned to the Wilsons. They have the bucks, they are big seawall users, and they're moving into that stretch of seawall-free beachfront.

It's not them, they say – but they would contribute. "We're not the anonymous donor, but we're in full support of it," Mrs. Wilson said. They dream of cycling to work from Kits to their new Gastown offices, set to open in 2013.

They love the mayor's bike lane push, but have issues with the Park Board: The new beachfront Cactus Club disturbing what they call "the most beautiful view in the whole world," park restaurant signage they find "ugly and tacky," and Coca-Cola and McDonald's brands named at the Kits Beach playground.

"Those things seem small, but everything's incremental," Mr. Wilson said, warning if civic leaders aren't careful, the beauty of Vancouver could descend into the dumpiness of a Coney Island. "They're wrecking the golden goose."

On the charitable front, the Wilsons have focused much of their attention on building schools in Ethiopia, while locally there have been substantial gifts to BC Children's Hospital and the Union Gospel Mission.

They have not, they say, hired a philanthropy consultant. "We want to be connected to what it is that we're giving. It has to resonate, to mean something to us," Mrs. Wilson said, adding it is "an honour" to be able to make a difference in her city.

"Sometimes it takes a long time to understand philanthropy," Mr. Rennie said. "And from my few encounters with Chip and Shannon, they've figured it out very quickly. When the planet's good to you, you should be good to the planet. You do feel that. And Vancouver's really lucky to have a new corporate citizen."



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