

PROFILE Brett Smith

Brett Smith epitomizes the American dream: He was able to parlay a childhood passion – in this case, snowboarding – into a successful sports marketing business; to grow the business over the years to serve diverse markets; then step away during the pandemic, selling the business to his partners to enable him to stay at home and share more equally in family responsibilities. He is working on various hands-on projects from home, and, at 50, contemplating his entrepreneurial future. At OZ he also looks toward the future from several positions of leadership recently undertaken.

Brett grew up in New Hartford, NY a suburb of Utica. His dad is an ob/gyn, now retired; his mom a chemist and artist, still painting and sculpting. He is the youngest of three siblings. In order to escape the NY/NJ metropolitan environs while raising their family, his parents made the move to Central New York State. They joined a Reform temple in Utica, where Brett attended Hebrew School and celebrated his bar mitzvah. His sister, married and the mother of two sons, now lives in Barrington, RI, works in a family business, and is a leader in RI Moms Demand Action, a non-profit organization that advocates against gun violence. His brother is a chef living in northern California with his wife and daughter.

“As a kid, I lived and breathed skateboarding and snowboarding,” Brett recalls, and in high school he began to compete in snowboard events, with the help of several sponsors. Continuing to compete in New England and out West off and on while studying geology at Boston University, he made contacts within the ski and snow industry and gained an understanding of the action sports field.

While anticipating a career as a geologist, Brett decided to spend his first post-collegiate winter snowboarding. “Before committing to a ‘real job’ I moved to Vermont with the mission of getting a free season pass at Killington in exchange for acting as a ‘snowboard consultant,’” he says. “It was the very beginning of the growth of the sport.” What he received, in addition to the pass, was a job offer to help the mountain develop its snowboarding business. He worked at Killington for three years, from 1993 to 1996 in one of the first positions of its kind. Unexpectedly, it was the first step in what was to be his career path.

Brett met a woman there from the Burlington area who was starting an agency that would help well-known and lesser-known consumer brands market to teens and young adults. Brett joined her at Fuse in 1996 and helped build the company from the ground up. After a few years he and another partner bought out their investors. The business grew organically over the years from its narrow niche in action sports to encompass mainstream sports, music, fashion, college marketing, online marketing, and other areas of youth culture, along the way working for clients such as Burton Snowboards, Pepsi’s Mountain Dew, General Mills, Gatorade, Harley Davidson, Amazon and TikTok. By early 2020, the company had 53 employees at their headquarters in Winooski.

At a Halloween party in 2000 Brett met Elisa Freeman, a Skidmore graduate from Auburn, NY. Elisa was in Burlington visiting her sister, a UVM student. The two clicked as friends, and Elisa subsequently took a job at Fuse. When their relationship turned romantic, she left Fuse to help a start-up sister company. Elisa grew up in Auburn, NY the eldest of four siblings. The family

were involved in the Presbyterian church when she was young. She describes herself as ‘an artist, an entomology enthusiast, and a seeker of greater understanding.’ She paints in oil, does drawings in colored pencil and screen printing. Elisa’s work has been shown at Skidmore, her alma mater, and she has exhibited in various places around Burlington. She was a past Art Hop juried show first place winner. Both Brett and Elisa are supporters of local art and social justice organizations and projects.

They were married in 2004 in her parents’ yard on Owasco Lake, NY by a family friend, and are the parents of three children: Zoe, approaching her 13th birthday, her younger sister Aven, 11, and their brother Arlo, 7. Zoe is a 7th grader at Edmunds. She loves art and making jewelry, and she spends five days a week doing ballet and jazz dance at the Vermont Ballet Theatre School. Aven, a 5th grader at Champlain Elementary School, also dances both ballet and jazz, plays the piano and loves singing, acting, Harry Potter, art, fashion and the outdoors. She attends Crow’s Path, a weekly one-day outdoor education program at Rock Point. Arlo, in the 2nd grade at Champlain, plays the piano, is into Lego, Pokemon and dragon books, and likes to think about nature, matter and space. His dad notes that Arlo loves animals, especially snakes. “A favorite COVID summer activity was visiting Ethan Allen Homestead’s old well, which is home to a huge nest of garter snakes.”

As an interfaith couple, with both religions of equal value and relevance, Brett and Elisa engaged in serious discussions about how to handle the issue of religion with their children. Ultimately (and somewhat unexpectedly, Brett notes), they decided to raise them in the Jewish tradition. The family celebrates Jewish holidays at home and joins Elisa’s family when they gather at Christmas.

The kids attended Chabad’s Gan Yeladim preschool when they were young. Searching for a place for them to continue their Jewish education, Brett and Elisa turned to Ohavi Zedek when Zoe was a 3rd grader, attracted by Naomi Barell’s creative Hebrew School curriculum and award-winning initiatives. Brett says, “Thinking back on my own Hebrew School experience, I’m surprised at how different this is for our kids. They actually like it!” Zoe, who is preparing for her bat mitzvah on April 10, has had a really rewarding experience with her OZ Hebrew School Mitzvah Project, Brett notes. “Her *d’var Torah* focuses on women’s equity, and for her project she chose to raise funds and donations for the non-profit Steps to End Domestic Violence.”

Having volunteered at Hebrew School-sponsored events and engaged fully with the Hebrew School and its family programming, Brett and Elisa signed on to become members of OZ in 2018. Expecting to be on the outer fringe of membership because of their mixed marriage, they were surprised to find themselves surrounded by many similar families. ‘We’re almost the norm,’ Brett observes. He thinks the congregation’s embrace of interfaith families should be better publicized in the effort to attract other young families. And, because spirituality can be expressed in myriad ways, he would like to explore ways for OZ families to connect beyond the walls of the synagogue.

After a couple of years Brett joined the Hebrew School Committee, and this past year an opportunity arose to serve as co-chair with Ingrid Pels. He felt that he had the energy and the time to be able to make a real contribution as a co-leader of the committee. “I love Brett and his family!” Education Director Naomi exclaims. “They jump into everything 110% with all their

energy, creativity and thoughtfulness. I so appreciate Brett's bottomless bag of ideas and enjoy the numerous conversations we have had about all the exciting directions we'd like to take the Hebrew School."

Brett is also a newly elected member of the OZ Board of Directors. "My main focus on the board is to help amplify the voices of Preschool and Hebrew School families, to promote multigenerational projects and connect the various synagogue constituencies with one another," he says. "Communicating is easier with everyone at the table." To that end, Ingrid, Brett and the Hebrew School Committee recently launched the OZ Families Facebook Group, a way for Full Circle Preschool, Hebrew School, the teen program, staff and other congregants to support and connect through conversation and dialogue.

At Brett's suggestion, the G'MaCH Committee organized the COVID Vaccination Awareness Campaign, through which he, Cantor Steve and co-chairs Karen and Eric Corbman recruit volunteers to contact congregants eligible for the vaccine to ensure that they have all the information they need to sign up for their shots, and to help them make their appointments, if necessary. "It's nice to think we contacted nearly every single congregant over 70 to be sure their vaccinations are taken care of, and it was great to see several newer, younger community members sign up to make the phone calls," he says. "Many of the calls went quickly beyond a vaccine check in, and transitioned into heartwarming conversations."

Brett is also one of the Imagine 2025 Gang, along with Yoram Samets, Jeff Potash, Josh Kernoff, and Ingrid Pels. "As a member of the leadership team, Brett brings tremendous skills to our group, both in regard to media technologies and organizational communications," says Jeff. "More than that, though, he brings great passion and energy to our efforts, in reaching out and building relationships, sharing ideas, and engaging others. His enthusiasm, optimism and imagination is nothing short of infectious. We are tremendously grateful to him for taking on a leadership role at OZ."

Like all parents of young children, Brett and Elisa are at home guiding them through remote learning in school and in Hebrew School. While balancing kids and family life, Elisa continues to create art and Brett is enjoying working with his hands. Through research, on-line instruction and YouTube videos he has built a stone wall and is currently restoring a Boston Whaler and a 50-year-old camper. And, of course, exploring ideas for future business projects....

They've also been snowboarding. "All five of us love it," Brett says. "We've been getting out to Sugarbush once a week, which helps with our sanity." As big water (lake and ocean) lovers, the family has looked forward to winter vacations on Sanibel Island in Florida and summers on Nantucket. They are, as are we all, eager to get back to a 'new normal.'

Thankfully, the Freeman/Smiths are already enjoying a 'new normal' health-wise. Elisa is a breast cancer survivor. Diagnosed in 2017, she is now on a decade-long monitoring cycle after surgery, radiation and a return to good health. "The treatment, communicating about it with our young kids, and frankly facing mortality were pretty terrifying," Brett acknowledges. "But we did find some silver linings. We had great care from doctors and social workers. We were supported by loving circles of friends, family and co-workers. And we tried our best to teach our kids about how a family can work through a crisis together."

Happily, they have something else to look forward to: Elisa's parents have just bought a second home in Burlington. "We are being cautious about gathering until vaccinations are complete," Brett says. "But it's very exciting for all of us."

~ Judy Hershberg

SIDEBAR: I could not end this interview without asking about Brett's signature dreadlocks. What's the story there? I asked him. "I struggled with my frizzy hair as a kid," he said. Neither a 'fro, a flattop nor anything in between made him happy. As a Bob Marley fan in his senior year in high school, he decided to try dreadlocks, and he entered college with nascent 1" proto-dreads. "I found that it was a good hairstyle for me," he says. "I liked being a white male with dreadlocks, and I kept it going."

Kudos to you, Brett!

