

SAUNDERS: Sisters grad is traveling the world in pursuit of passion

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approached by recent U of O graduate Scottie Proctor with an enticing idea. Will heard Proctor's pitch and jumped.

The young men put together a team to create story-driven content about the outdoor world.

"He asked me to be a photographer. I was more than excited to do it," said Saunders during a recent phone interview.

The timing couldn't have been better. Saunders was feeling burned out at school.

"It was a spark for me. We did a project about the Jackson Hole Air Force. We put up our own money doing micro stories. It was very successful so we kept doing it. I graduated that summer and we landed our first big client, Backcountry.com. It was a four-month campaign, using photo video design and social media strategy. That's how we got started and realized it was a business opportunity."

Saunders does commercial work for clients like Patagonia, North Face and Black Diamond.

"I hire talent and pick interesting locations," Saunders said. "That's what pays the bills."

He's really proud of the stories he documents. Some of the locations and people he's met left him eager to go back.

Saunders does freelance

work as well as projects through their company, Local's Project. He and Proctor are co-owners with Sam Ewer and Jacob Oster. Known as a storytelling agency, Saunders and their tight-knit group of filmmakers, photographers and designers seek out athletes and artists around the U.S. and capture unique and inspiring stories.

Recently, he did a photo shoot in Oman with world-renowned climber Gaz Leah. He first met Leah when he did a job for Backcountry.com that featured Leah rock-climbing in New York City. They had a blast.

"You build a connection and from there you hope it'll last forever," said Saunders.

The NYC project opened the door for an invitation to accompany Leah to Oman on an epic, life-altering adventure.

"Oman's absolutely one of the coolest places I've been. The people are some of the nicest I've ever met," said Saunders. "The landscape is very rugged; big mountains and canyons and big beautiful pools. It's one of the gems in the Middle East."

Seeing new, exotic places makes Saunders want more.

"I have a list of places I'd like to go. Newfoundland is high on my list. Somalia is one of the most beautiful-looking countries I've seen."

Staying hungry, working hard and learning from those who blazed the trail in action-photography has opened opportunities Saunders never dreamed possible. He's



PHOTO BY WILL SAUNDERS

A Will Saunders shot of the Beehive tombs in Oman, which date to 2000 B.C.

assisting adventure photography legend Tim Kemple and soaking up the experience.

Saunders says his parents provided access and encouragement to try new outdoor endeavors. He and his sister, Autumn, went on family trips with their mom and dad, Kimberly and Andrew Gorayeb. They explored Yellowstone, Yosemite and the East Coast where Will spent countless hours sailing. They hiked, fly-fished, backpacked and sailed in squalls that revealed Will's love of challenging conditions.

Moving to Sisters hooked Saunders on the outdoor industry.

"It opened me up and helped me appreciate where I live," Saunders said. "From there, I got into river guiding and thought that's what I'd do for the rest of my life. Sisters introduced me to the mountain community and living sustainably and creatively. It inspired me a lot."

Looking back, Saunders has some advice for students: "I encourage people in high school to explore what's possible out there. We're taught

that there's math, English, and science. Whether it's a trade or something athletic, there's a whole world of jobs out there. I didn't realize what marketing or advertising meant. So keep your options open. It's amazing how many people still do jobs they don't really love. I feel lucky and fortunate. It's more work than I ever experienced in my life and I love it. I wouldn't do anything else."

To see more of Saunders' images visit the Locals Project website: www.localsproject.com/home.

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