

Something called “Tectoria” is advertising everywhere from Victoria International Airport to downtown parking meters and even the Canada Day “Living Flag” event on the lawn of the B.C. Legislature. Spouting cheeky slogans — “Home to 100 killer whales — and 1,500 killer apps” — it’s a branding initiative cooked up by Dan Gunn and the Victoria Advanced Technology Council (VIATeC).

In statistical terms, technology is Victoria’s No. 1 sector, but it lacks an identity. San Francisco has the iconic Silicon Valley; Vancouver has become Hollywood North. The Tectoria message, in addition to promoting our climate and lifestyle, touts the sector’s range of expertise in environmental technology, e-commerce, life sciences, and software.

Gunn, 39, is in his sixth year as VIATeC’s executive director after moving to Victoria in 1999 from Ontario. He joined the organization in 2000 as director of communications and IT after completing a BComm in entrepreneurial management at Royal Roads University. He’s witnessed major growth in the advanced technology sector, which now comprises more than 800 companies employing over 13,000 people, with a collective annual revenue approaching \$2 billion.

Gunn graced the cover of *Douglas* magazine’s debut issue in November/December 2006, and since that time, apart from a few more grey hairs, he seems not to have aged a day. It’s a look that works for the baby-faced Gunn, whose winning disposition would have been well suited to a career in politics — exactly where he once thought he was headed. He was elected to the city council in his hometown of Keswick, on the shores of Lake Simcoe, at the tender age of 23.

“I was a kid who didn’t know I probably shouldn’t get elected,” he laughs. “So I just ran. People expected that the senior citizens wouldn’t support me, because what do I know, I’m a dumb kid, right? But they supported me more than any other demographic; they really liked the idea of someone with new ideas.”

Gunn went on to study political science at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, with the intention of pursuing a law degree, but switched to business. His girlfriend at the time, however, had been accepted to law school at UVic, so Gunn made the move with her, finishing his degree at Royal Roads. They eventually broke up, but he met his wife, Jeanie, at Royal Roads; they have a son, Max, born last year.

How does your political experience inform what you do at VIATeC?

I was a councillor for only three years. I didn’t run for re-election. But I learned that most people making decisions are better informed than the people criticizing them. And more importantly, most people who are making decisions are trying to do the right thing. That allows me to approach [my job] from an inquisitive rather than a judgmental standpoint. When you’re asking questions as opposed to throwing rocks, you get better feedback, better information, and you can be more persuasive. Make a discussion about a mutual victory; otherwise, one side or the other will just dig in and get more stubborn. And there’s not a lot of upside do that.

In 2006, in this magazine, you said, “You don’t have to build a company in Palo Alto; you can do it in Victoria.” Does that hold true today?

Definitely. But it’s not perfect here. We don’t have the venture capital community that they have in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley. But, to turn that into a strength, if you can convince people in Victoria, then it’s not going to be based on hype or groupthink, or following a trend — it’s going to be based on business fundamentals. The thing about companies in Victoria is that they’re very good at what they do and they come from a very, strong, stable place, and that’s why, during things like the recession we saw in late 2008 and 2009, the tech sector continued to grow. More and more, you can put a company anywhere, and Victoria’s a beautiful place, which gives us an advantage.

With Tectoria, are you worried about stepping on the toes of the tourism industry?

I don’t see them as competition at all. Attracting people to the island, as tourism does, is vital to us. Some of those 3.5 million people will become workers in Victoria, they’ll become investors here, so without all that tourism, we probably wouldn’t have the tech sector we have today. We’re not saying ignore the harbour, or the whales, or the trees. We’re saying you can have that, and a great job.

At whom is the campaign targeted? Job seekers, investors, companies?

I believe in people, not companies. One of the reasons we’ve had such a resilient tech sector is that almost every company here was started here. The roots run deep. CEOs’ families are here, their staff are here, they’re not interested in moving. That kind of loyalty to the community is very, very valuable.

When you attract a company, you’re usually attracting an office. It’s usually not a head office, and when things go sour, the satellite offices are the first ones to suffer. What we do is find bright people who have identified that this is where they want to be, and then help them achieve their career and company goals.

As someone close to innovative technology, what are your thoughts on the end of the space shuttle era?

It’s not only the end of an era ... there’s something to lament about the spirit of that innovation. Talk about big, hairy, audacious goals. For example, the International Space Station — we have a *station*, in *space*, that people live on for six months at a time. The science and innovation required to achieve that, and the lessons learned along the way — they’re going to be important to humanity. So, the fact that we’re going to learn fewer of those lessons for a period of time is disappointing and disconcerting. You know, I just can’t count on Virgin Airlines to run a space program. But it’s great we’ve reached a point where there’s a corporate entity that feels it can offer that. But ... I don’t want to see the Golden Arches etched into the moon.

It seems like you have a great job.

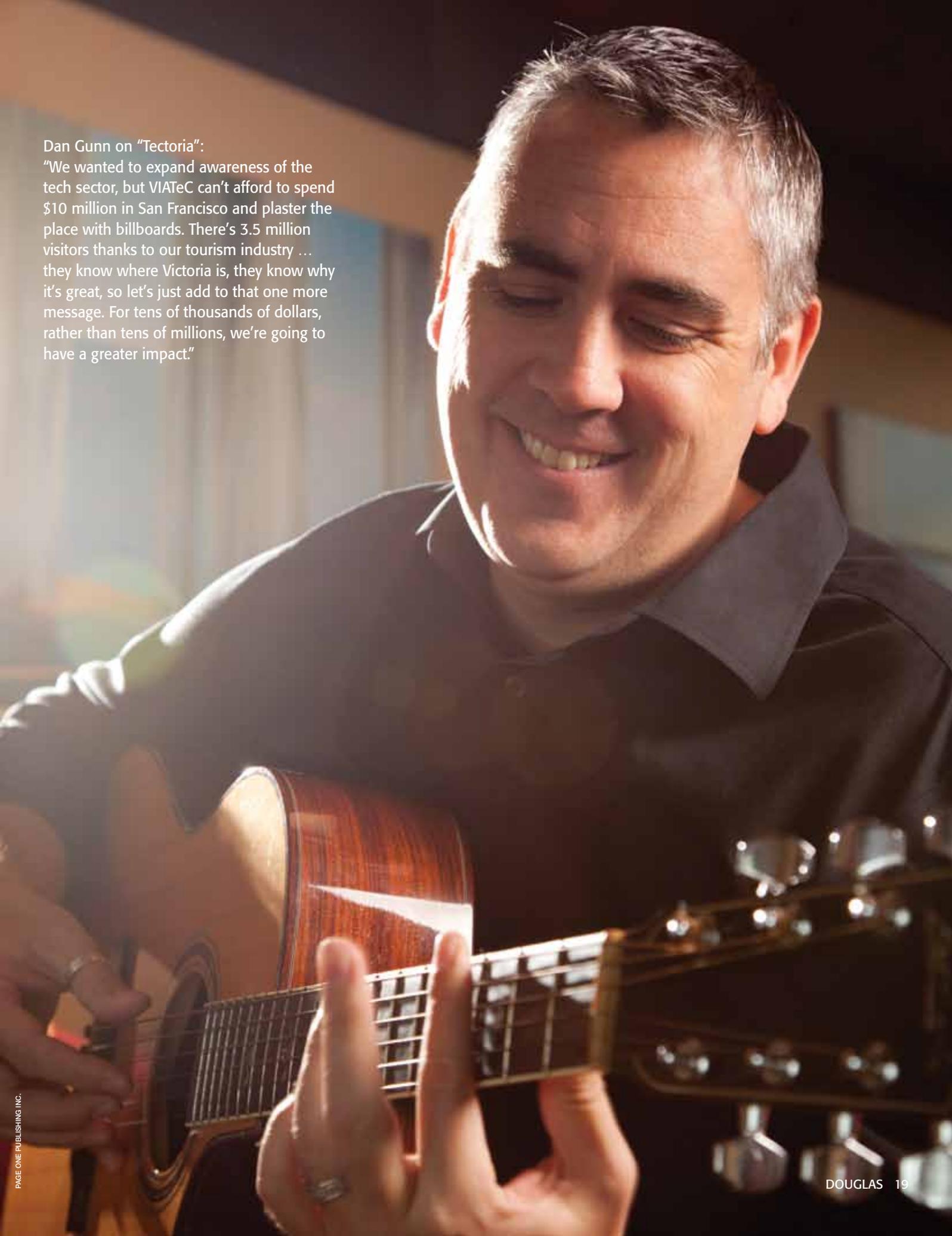
I have the best job in the world. I’m very, very lucky.

So what do you do for fun when you’re not having fun at work?

I spend a lot of time with Max and my wife. I play guitar with a band or two here in Victoria. I play guitar every day. That’s my relaxation. I like poker. I play with a few people locally, and I’m known to take the occasional trip to Vegas [laughs]. And I love live music. I go to shows in Victoria, as well as Vegas. Last year I saw Lady Gaga, Bob Dylan, and John Mellencamp. I saw Rush twice. Golf used to be huge for me but now I only golf for work or if my dad’s in town — we have a longstanding rivalry.

If you could do anything else, what would it be?

I’m in the kind of job where I’m surrounded by doors of opportunity ... a fabulous feeling. But I also know that if I ever went through one of those doors, when it closes behind me, it doesn’t open again, and then in front of me I’ll have three or four doors of opportunity as opposed to a thousand. So, I recognize that I’m in the middle of something great. I’m in the eye of the hurricane, and I don’t know that I want to step outside it. ■

A close-up photograph of a man with short, graying hair, smiling warmly while playing an acoustic guitar. He is wearing a dark, collared shirt. The lighting is soft and focused on his face and the guitar, creating a warm, intimate atmosphere. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting like a studio or a living room.

Dan Gunn on "Tectoria":

"We wanted to expand awareness of the tech sector, but VIATeC can't afford to spend \$10 million in San Francisco and plaster the place with billboards. There's 3.5 million visitors thanks to our tourism industry ... they know where Victoria is, they know why it's great, so let's just add to that one more message. For tens of thousands of dollars, rather than tens of millions, we're going to have a greater impact."