

Small Business Spotlight:

Lauren Phillips | Co-Founder & CEO
OVERhang Education Centre, Est. 2009

Life Story

Growing up in a Montreal suburb, Lauren Phillips felt more at home in the outdoors, hiking, paddling, and camping with family and friends. At a young age she joined Scouts Canada which gave her the opportunity to grow into leadership roles while participating in outdoor activities. Eager to find a career that would give her the opportunity to work outdoors, Lauren earned a Bachelor of Science in forestry from UBC and began her forestry career in northern B.C., eventually moving to Prince George. Working as an urban forester, the concept for OVERhang Education Centre began off the side of her desk when Lauren, who instructed ice rescue and swiftwater safety in her spare time, started coordinating the work of other outdoor safety instructors and planning an indoor climbing gym. Lauren saw a window of opportunity and jumped to make it a full-time business.



Lauren co-founded OVERhang Education Centre with her husband in 2009. What started as a climbing gym has grown into a full-service first aid training facility and education centre for outdoor safety and adventure.

What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

It's funny – I never actually imaged myself as an entrepreneur. Originally, my husband was looking at business opportunities and we kept coming back to the idea of a climbing gym. We would cruise around town after work and in the middle of the night, scoping out industrial buildings as potential locations for the gym. At the same time, my expertise in outdoor education was growing, so it became a two-pronged approach: climbing gym and outdoor education centre.

Who is your role model/mentor?

I can't name just one person – I have a wonderful network of people who feed my passions and encourage me; occasionally raising their eyebrows at my crazy ideas, but supporting me anyways. A number of friends and colleagues have played really important roles in terms of my personal and business development.

How has your business evolved over the years?

The original concept was a climbing gym, but we ended up opening as an outdoor safety and adventure education centre first. Since then, we've opened the climbing gym facility, and introduced first aid training. We have recently ventured into providing safety services for businesses operating in hazardous environments. As opportunities present themselves, I take a good look and then jump in and try new things.

What challenges did you encounter while growing your business? How did you overcome these?

We want to help people develop and grow, whether they are employees, subcontractors, or the community we serve. This looks different for different people and figuring out how to best meet these needs has been challenging – but also very interesting. I've had to learn to really look at the difference between intention and perception; how someone could perceive something differently from what I intended. It's about stepping back to make sure that communication is received in a way that makes sense for the intended audience.

What do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

I've applied my skills, experience, and passion to build something from the ground up. I'm really proud of the fact that I can now step away for a bit and trust our people and our systems. It's no longer just about me, and this is a measure of success.

What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

We call it 'being our own boss,' but I'm in the service industry and serving my clients, so they're my boss. I've learned to push myself and challenge myself, but also to allow myself just to be me and to be human. I try to approach situations recognizing that we are all human and can move forward as individuals; not just as representatives of businesses or brands. Whether it's relationships between myself and my employees, or between myself and my clients, allowing myself and those I work with to be vulnerable has worked very well for my business.

What has been your greatest reward as a small business in your industry?

Being part of people's growth. Whether that's employees who are just starting university, or clients in swiftwater safety out on the river, seeing a quick progression of growth, learning and self-confidence is very rewarding for me

What advice would you give to entrepreneurs looking to scale up their business?

For me, success has been based on partnerships rather than competition. Instead of seeing everyone as competition, I look for partnership opportunities. I also find ways to work together and grow the community so that we can all move forward. I apply the concept of 'high tides float all boats.'

What advice would you give to aspiring young entrepreneurs?

Do it anyways, despite the naysayers. You will never know if you don't try. It's easy to get lost in the details, but make sure to look up now and then to remember the passion that drove you to do this. Keep finding ways to be engaged in that passion, and remember to have fun!

What is your favourite B.C. destination?

Anywhere with a river or a lake or a mountain. Every year when the salmon are spawning I go paddling in the Stellako river, and then rock climb at a nearby spot. I even jump overboard and go snorkeling with the fish!

The Bottom Line

- OVERhang Education Centre employs at least 30 staff and a number of subcontractors throughout the year
- Lauren Philips was recognized in the Prince George Chamber of Commerce's top 40 under 40 in 2018/19
- OVERhang Education Centre is focused on growing both the indoor and outdoor climbing communities, as well as the number and depth of their outdoor education and safety instructors