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River guides wear a secret smile. It holds memories of frothing whitewater rumbling through a canyon before settling into placid turquoise pools. The memories harbor the rhythm of river time—that surrendering to the flow of water, one of the most powerful elemental forces on earth.

Intimate knowledge of river time shows in the faces of the four current owners of Glacier Raft Company. As the West Glacier company pushes through its fourth decade rafting the rivers bordering Glacier National Park, the second generation is sliding into position to guide the boats into the future. One original owner is now passing the rubber rafts on to his progeny, ensuring a continued legacy of one of Montana's oldest outdoor businesses. ▶

Glacier Raft Company
passes the oar to the
next generation

By Becky Lomax

Jeff Baldelli, left, Cassie Baldelli, Darwon Stoneman, Terri Stoneman and DJ Stoneman stand in front of Glacier Outdoor Center in West Glacier | Photo courtesy of the Stoneman family.



Clockwise from top left: DJ Stoneman, left, and a friend on their first solo overnight raft trip. Cassie Stoneman on an early-day rafting trip. Cassie and Darwon Stoneman take a break. | Photos courtesy of the Stoneman family.

This past winter, the longtime Glacier Raft Company trio of partners—Darwon Stoneman, Sally Thompson and Onno Wieringa—began the process of passing off the oars. As the older generation began to exit, the new generation stepped in. Thompson and Wieringa sold their portion of the business to Stoneman's daughter, Cassie, and her husband, Jeff Baldelli. Now, the current inter-generational ownership melds Darwon and Terri Stoneman contributing years of knowledge while Cassie and Jeff pump in fresh creative energy.

"We've all been talking about an exit strategy," says Darwon, although he admits he'll still be the big boss. "We're old dinosaurs. We're at a point where we need some new energy and a new skill set. Jeff and Cassie are bringing in new enthusiasm." This winter, the community face of the company started to shift to the young couple.

At its birth, Glacier Raft Company rode the wave of the national outdoor recreation boom. Stoneman, Wieringa and a third partner launched the company in 1976. "We all did everything," says Darwon. With two rubber rafts, a van and a tiny shack for an office, they started guiding visitors down the Middle Fork of the Flathead River's rollicking rapids.

That fall, the U.S. Congress caught up with what the three raft-company owners already knew—that the Middle Fork was a wondrous place. Congress designated the Flathead's Middle Fork, along with the North and South forks, as national Wild and Scenic Rivers, a testament to the free-flowing beauty and wildness of 219 river

miles.

Over the years, Glacier Raft Company grew beyond the rivers of Glacier National Park. They extended Middle Fork trips into the Great Bear and Bob Marshall wildernesses. They were the first to run Idaho's Lochsa River. They expanded the company to the Lower Flathead River, Cataract Canyon in Utah and Kicking Horse River in British Columbia. More recently, they dabbled for several winters running a Nordic ski center.

Pruning out rafting on other rivers, Glacier Raft Company today is one of four West Glacier whitewater operations responsible for taking about 35,000 visitors down the Middle Fork each summer. Visitors go for the fun ride: splashing in pristine water, reveling in rugged scenery and glimpsing an eagle or grizzly. "We're inundated with so much technology that rafting offers a genuine experience providing a pause on the road," Jeff explains.

Floating the Flathead's Middle and North forks form the company's framework. The river menu fills with half- and full-day trips, scenic and dinner floats, whitewater rafting, inflatable kayaking, overnights and fly fishing. The company operates from two West Glacier locations: the "downtown" office serves as rafting headquarters while Glacier Outdoor Center sits a half mile west on Highway 2 with rental log cabins and four private trout ponds for guest use and instruction. The center handles fishing and overnight trips, boat and camping equipment rentals, shuttles for self-guided rafters and serves as a full-service fly shop and outdoor store.

Of the West Glacier raft companies, Glacier Raft Company has the only permit to lead trips down the Upper Middle Fork of the Flathead River in the Great Bear and Bob Marshall wildernesses. Accessed only by plane or horseback, the river rages with whitewater in June and bounces with

trout for fly fishing in July and August. "For many people, the wilderness trips are a life-changing experience," describes Darwon.

On the business end, rafting requires dancing with fickle snowmelt, water flow and weather. Success depends on tourist visitation and deft guides to ensure safety, but that plays out on a constantly morphing river: whitewater wave trains peak and drop, levels deepen and shrink, rapids wash out or buck up, huge rock bars shift, raft-grounding shallows arise and log jams appear. Those running a rafting business do so for sheer love of the sport, for it's akin to a balancing game of standing on an inflated tube on moving water.

For one, the company crams 90 percent of its income within 60 days. That makes for a crazy-busy couple months, where company owners wear multiple hats. "You have to be multi-talented," says Darwon, "and ironically, when you run a raft company, you don't always get to go rafting."

During the mid-summer crunch, the company provides a unique working atmosphere. Of its nearly 100 employees, many are now the children of the original guides. "It's actually a huge extended family," beams Terri, who works with food service, housekeeping and reservations. Now the inter-generational ownership reinforces the familial bond.

For the new generation, the Stoneman children are grasping the oars to leap forward into the fluctuating rapids of a seasonal business. "We've all worked together for so many years. We didn't go into this blind," Cassie says. "But not a whole lot of businesses get to make people's day all the time. It's a fun environment to work in."

For Cassie, ownership means a return to her roots with the rhythm of rivers. "I remember as a child how cool it was to run the bail bucket," she nods to the practice now rendered obsolete by self-bailing rafts. As kids, Cassie and her younger brother, DJ, worked on *The River Wild* movie.

She also recalls an early overnight Middle Fork trip with Darwon and

DJ, putting in at Bear Creek in the pouring rain after Terri dropped them off and drove away. "Dad's favorite quote is 'Anyone can go rafting when it's sunny!'" laughs Cassie. "I saw Mom drive by on the highway and thought 'Please, save us.'"

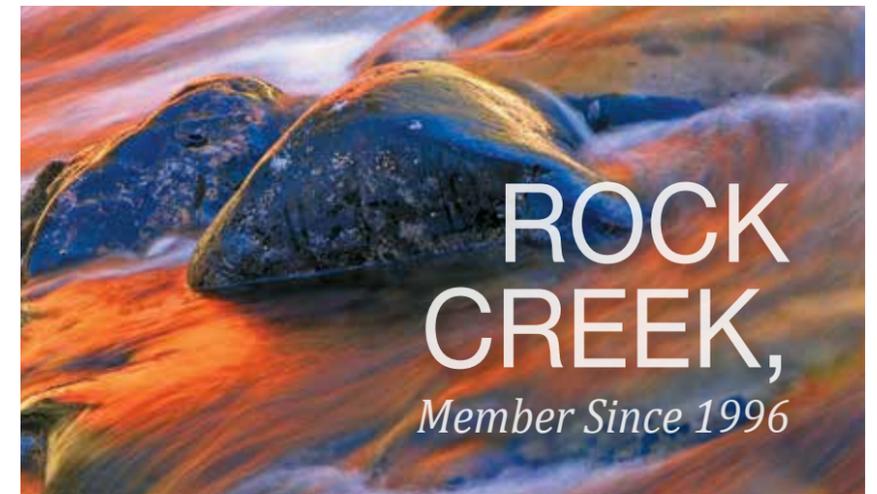
At age 15, Cassie joined the company, checking in visitors coming to raft. The company hired her high school girlfriends, too; several became guides. With a college degree in marketing, Cassie now juggles her job with a medical supply company and ownership in the raft company.

For Jeff, ownership means pursuing a skill he learned as an adult. Growing up in Buffalo, New York, he came to Glacier at Cassie's prodding, lured with assurances that the company would teach him to guide rivers. "I'd never been in

a boat," confesses Jeff. Now with four summers under his life jacket, he will focus on marketing in winter and operations in summer, swapping into multiple hats during peak season.

In the wings, DJ—an avid river kayaker who drops over waterfalls—is working his way up. At an early age, he patched rafts and mowed company lawns. At 18, the youngest age allowed, DJ guided rafts down the Middle Fork. He returns for his fifth summer guiding, but will add more responsibilities leading trips and training new guides.

Perhaps the family that rafts together, stays together. As the rhythm of river time gives joy to the Stoneman family, together they give that unique pause on the road to others. ■



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