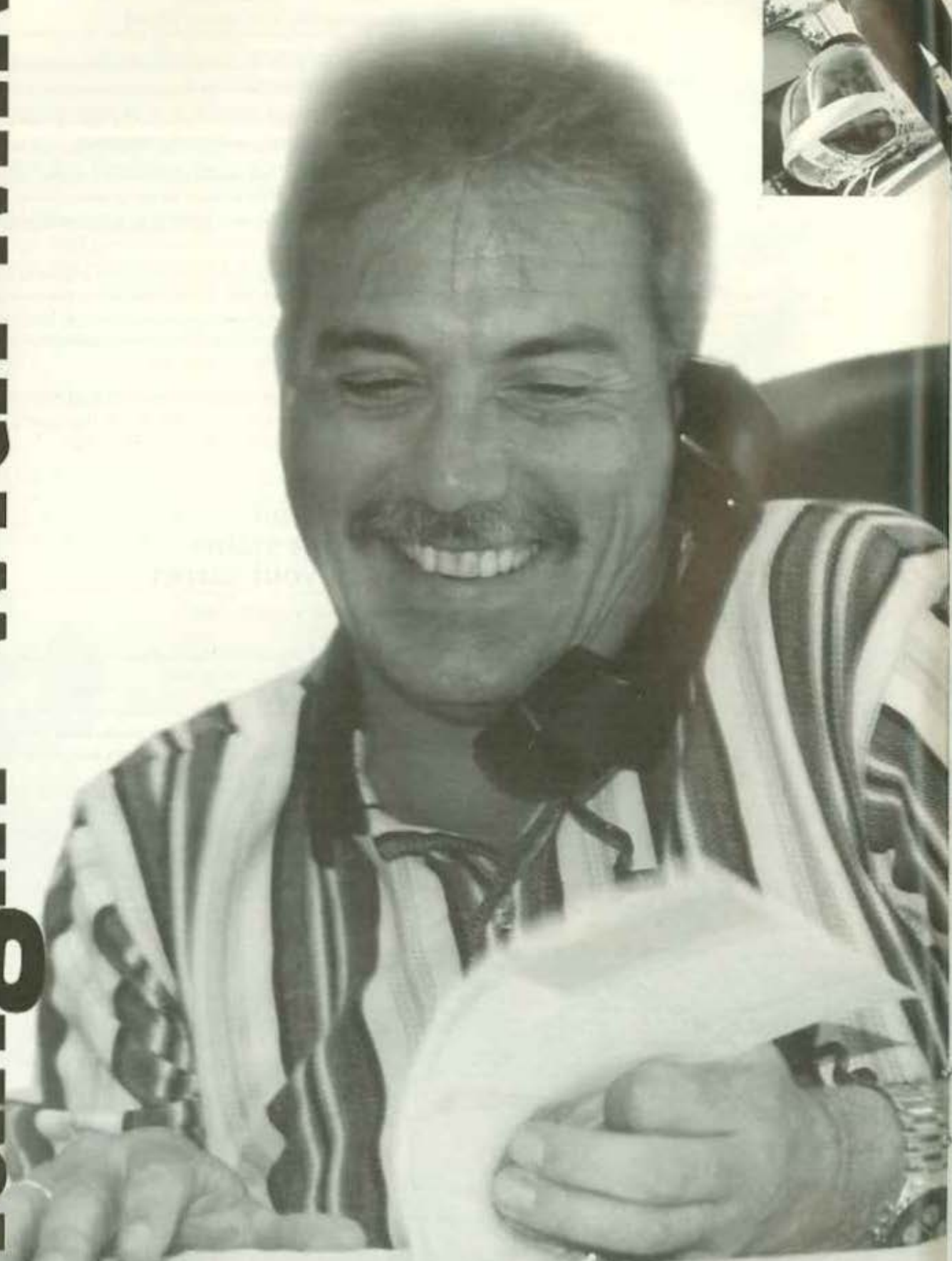


Hangin' with Mike



STORY & PHOTOS BY REID MASSON



It must be odd having someone watch your every move.

That's the position Mike Culos found himself in the day I trailed him from breakfast in the morning until dinner at night.

I have to say he was a great sport about it all, welcoming me into his home, allowing me to eavesdrop on meetings and conversations many people might be nervous having a journalist overhear. After all we're always working the angles, aren't we?

That, of course, was not the purpose of my mission. No, Okanagan Life simply wanted me to hover around Culos, so I could tell readers how the successful developer and Social Credit Party president spends his days.

I'm sorry to report that despite his obvious wealth, numerous toys, spectacular home and community prominence, Mike Culos is no different than your average Joe.

Sure he has more to fill his days of leisure than the ordinary guy — a helicopter, vintage cars, two hot tubs, an inground pool, not to mention the finances to travel, play golf, ski or whatever he desires. But he must first find the time to enjoy it all and like most Canadians his free time is a commodity of which there is little. Life is weighed down by the mundane drudgery and responsibilities that plague us all. Work-related meetings and phone calls, out-of-town travel to job sites, political and volunteer commitments, obligatory and often tiresome social engagements, kids' baseball and soccer games.

Like most of us, Culos and his wife Jan must confer about who will pick up the kids after school, who will meet the washing machine repair man at the house, when and if everyone will make it home for dinner. Not exactly the mental picture you might have of the rich and famous.

For those of you who aren't acquainted with Mike Culos, let me give you a little background. This was my second opportunity to get to know Culos in the past year. Last fall, I interviewed him as one of the Entrepreneur of the Year nominees by the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce. It was then that he filled me in on his life and business history and although he didn't win the award — he was among some pretty stiff competition — it was clear to me then Culos was no slug. He'd accomplished a great deal in his 43 years, flinging himself headlong into a career that will chew up and spit out most people.

Raised in Powell River on the coast, Culos finished school and went to work at the local mill which many young men at the time counted on to provide them with secure, good-paying employment for the rest of their working lives. Culos worked enough hours and saved enough money to buy himself a small plane before the age of 21. That was the first indication that Culos was someone who strove for the brass ring with relish and he wasn't afraid of hard work to get it.

When a strike at the mill loomed, Culos bailed out in search of better opportunities, ending up in the Okanagan where the sun and water had great appeal. He spent that first summer working on his uncle's farm, then landed a job as a mailman, meeting his future wife Jan who was the boss's daughter.

In the late 1970s, he and Jan were introduced to a local builder and to earn some extra money, started helping build houses in their spare time. Those were the boom years in the housing industry and the couple thought there was a great future in it. Culos left his position at the post office to pursue building full time. But in the early 1980s, the market dropped off dramatically. Interest rates had gone through the roof

and construction was slow. The Culos family, which now included twin girls born in 1984, struggled through a few lean years.

But they persevered. In 1985, Culos changed the company's focus from single to multi-family dwellings and today Culos Construction is a leader in senior housing development with projects in the Okanagan as well as Kamloops and the Kootenays.

And Culos' passion for flying has also developed into a business. He's now a trained helicopter pilot with a fleet of two, one of which is stored in a hanger on his East Kelowna estate. These machines, valued at about \$1.5 million, are too expensive to keep around just as toys, the insurance alone costs Culos about \$85,000 a year. So he set up a helicopter leasing business, which today has two full-time and one half-time pilot plus a full-time engineer and a base in both Kelowna and the Kootenays.

And that's not all. Culos' 13-acre property, which he purchased from former Kelowna mayor Jim Stuart, is a fully-operational apple orchard employing a full-time groundskeeper. Then there's his political affiliations. Culos was recently elected provincial president of the Social Credit Party and has the formidable task of rebuilding a once powerful organization decimated by scandal and disenchantment.

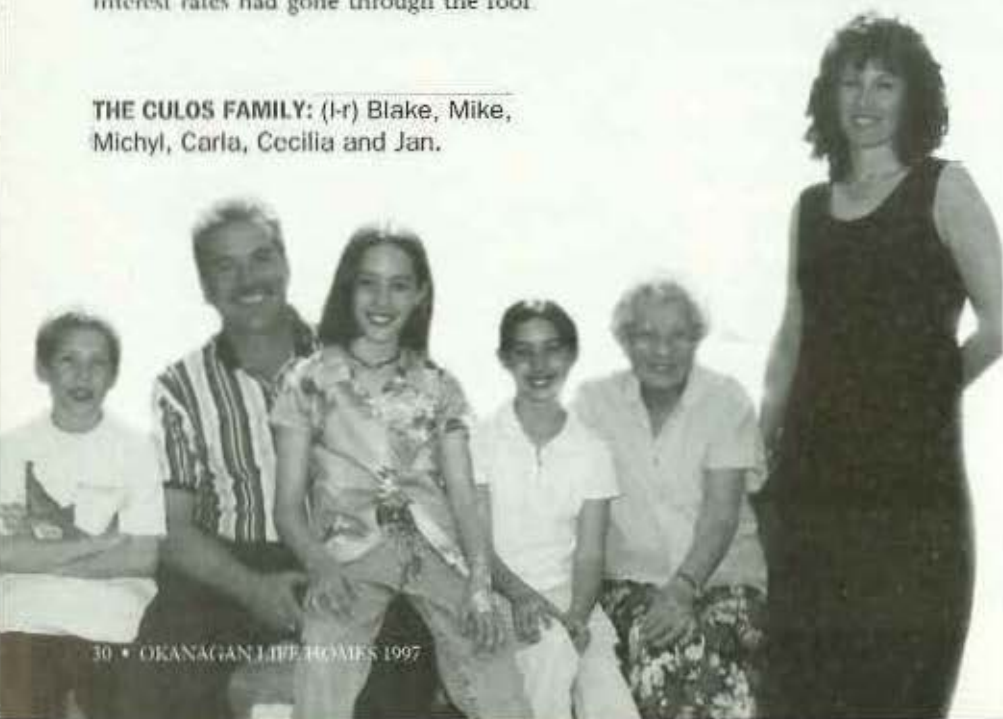
"This is nothing new to me. I was president of the Okanagan East Riding Association, I was part of it when it was flying high, I'm not about to quit when it hits a low. It will have its comeback."

All this adds up to a pretty full schedule for the man who must also find time for his three children Carla and Michyl, age 12, Blake, 10, plus his wife Jan, who works as the accountant for Culos.

Rising at 6 a.m., Culos usually starts his day with a stroll through the orchard with

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THE CULOS FAMILY: (l-r) Blake, Mike, Michyl, Carla, Cecilia and Jan.



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his coffee and a plain bagel, checking in on the groundskeeper and trying to identify problems that will need to be addressed on the property. The day I tag along, weeds and the irrigation system are foremost on his mind. The recent spell of unseasonably hot weather have turned the lush green meadows into fields of yellow as dandelions fill every available acre. He's also talking about the new washing machine he just

bought, for some reason it's hopping all over the floor and the sound it's making isn't very healthy.

...the silence is frequently pierced by his ringing phone and his roar of laughter.

The groundskeeper takes us to the helicopter hanger

which strongly resembles a barn on the outside, but nothing of the sort on the inside. It is spotless, I mean immaculate, not anything you'd expect a hanger to look like. Culos spends some time chatting about flight hours to operations manager and chief pilot John Kennedy.

Culos is pleased to hear that this month Kennedy is ahead of the game when it comes to costs.

At about 8:30 a.m., we climb into Culos' 4X4 - which he describes as his second home - and we head to his office in downtown Kelowna. Along the way, we stop at his financial planners, where he and Jan were to meet so they could sign RRSP papers. It is then that it dawns on me that although the couple work in the same office, they don't travel together. Jan leaves the house earlier than him, he explains later, so she can drop the kids off at school before work. She stays at the office until 3 p.m. and then goes to pick them up. Transportation is a big issue when you live 15 minutes out of town, but they wouldn't have it any other way.

And why not? The Culos farm is nothing short of heavenly. A bright, open house custom-designed by Culos himself, it's no less than 10,000 square feet, a size that overwhelmed his wife when it was constructed seven years ago. The angles and

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windows of the house take advantage of the surrounding landscape which includes the picturesque orchards which during my visit were in full bloom — and a panoramic view of Okanagan Lake and the mountains on the Westside. An exquisite interlocking-stone deck with a kidney-shaped pool and hot tub enhanced by lush shrubs makes the most of the surroundings. Despite the ability to go any place they desire, it's no surprise the Culos family would choose to their own backyard as a vacation spot.

"I still think this is the best job a guy can get out of bed for in the morning."

As we're driving, Culos talks about a trip he and Jan took to Palm Springs last winter, the first vacation in years without the children. Past excursions have

always included the entire family and usually not to anywhere exotic. As far as Culos is concerned, he's living in a vacation mecca, why go anywhere else?

The Culos Construction and Development Office is located in a charming St. Paul Street commercial complex, accented by a beautiful centre courtyard. It occupies a modest 1,200 square feet and Culos' own office is functional, but by no means extravagant — a desk, phone, filing cabinet, TV — in fact it's actually kind of sparse.

Having been in Kamloops the day before visiting a job site, Culos is greeted by a desk-full of mail and must-read documents. And it's payday, so a file folder of cheques is waiting to be signed. He spends the morning scribbling his signature and perusing contracts, proposals, industry news and letters.

It is quiet, but the silence is frequently pierced by his ringing phone and his unmistakable roar of laughter. After all even the most important of callers is subject to a little ribbing. And nothing is sacred, jokes about religion, race, sex are shared, but only in good fun and with no malice. Culos may be characterized as boisterous and brash at times, but he's first to take a shot at himself, never coming across as condescending or

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judgmental of others.

The first meeting of the day can only be described as brief. In 15 minutes flat, Culos and a colleague go over several crucial problems, talking at a rate that would challenge the speed of light. All seems well when the visitor leaves, but I feel rather dizzy and confused, thankful I don't have to explain concisely what just transpired.

A few more cheques signed and phone calls later, we're headed to lunch, this time with pilot Kennedy and lawyer Tom Smithwick. There's a lot of small talk, a few jokes before discussing the business at hand, a legal issue having to do with the helicopter company, the details of which I'm not privy to.

Later Culos tells me legal challenges are not unusual in his business, there are so many players in the game and they're not all happy all of the time. Sometimes Culos is the challenger, sometimes he's the challengee, either way it occupies a great deal of his time, some of which seems wasted. He cites as an example the condo owner who is suing him because the value of his property has declined since he bought it. He claims he was told he would never lose money on the deal. But who can guarantee what the housing market will do down the road? This suit may seem ridiculous, but it's very real and costly to defend.

During the afternoon, Culos takes me to a job site in Glenmore where construction crews are putting up a four-plex in a multi-family subdivision. There aren't many projects going on in the city, Culos considers the market a little saturated at the moment. But there's plenty of work outside the area, like in Kamloops where crews have been very busy lately. The unfortunate thing is much of Culos' employees have to spend

long stretches away from their families, but flexibility is essential for anyone who chooses to work in this business.

"You have to go where the work is and it's not always where you want it to be."

Culos spends a great deal of his time on the road. When his schedule is tight he can take one of the helicopters, one of the bonuses of owning your own, and that's always a pleasure. But more often than not, he finds himself behind the wheel of his truck. His two-year-old vehicle has more than 128,000 kilometres on it.

Although pleasure was his motivation for buying his first helicopter, Culos is lucky to fly once a month.

"It's business first for both myself and for the helicopters."

Late in the afternoon, we're back at the house, enjoying the



sunshine, a glass of wine and talking over the day, which incidentally was light and short on schedule for my benefit. Jan greets us with astonishment because her husband almost always works late. This rare treat

means he can take the twins to their ball game and he readily agrees.

I ask him if he enjoys his life, his work and without hesitation he nods enthusiastically. He doesn't regret a single choice he's made.

"I still think this is the best reason a guy can get out of bed for in the morning," he says, sipping his wine.

"Somedays you forget what it was like and you don't appreciate what you have. There were times in the past when we'd be partying up, dancing in the streets over making \$1,000 on a deal. Now we might make \$100,000 on a deal, then go home and watch 'Married with Children.'"