

## Markus and Uli Hecker

Markus and Uli Hecker have fully embraced their lives here in Saskatchewan, and at the moment, cannot imagine living anywhere else! Of course, they have not always lived in Saskatchewan, having emigrated from Germany, and spending a few years in Michigan before arriving in Saskatoon in 2007.

Uli was born Ulrike Barth in Würzburg, Bavaria (Bayern). Situated on the Main River, Würzburg lies at the center of the Franconian wine country. Uli has a twin sister, and the twins have an older sister as well. Uli's fondest memories of her youth revolve around Christmas and German Christmas traditions in her family. Both parents were teachers. Her dad was the principal at a Gymnasium (German high school). So, it was natural for Uli to follow in the footsteps of her parents. She received all of her education in Würzburg including a university degree in Education. Degrees from Bavarian universities are highly rated in Germany, and it was easy for Uli to find a teaching position in Hamburg, which is where she met Markus Hecker.



*German themed farewell party in Michigan before coming to Canada.*



*Markus engrossed in his work, seen here with a large river sturgeon.*

Markus was born in Neuss, North Rhine-Westphalia, a city located on the west bank of the Rhine River opposite Düsseldorf. Markus was an only child. His dad worked in manufacturing as a machine programmer, and his mother worked for Germany's Federal Central Tax Office. At an early age, Markus became intrigued with the underwater world of Jacques Cousteau, and by the first grade, he knew he wanted to be a marine biologist. Markus fondly remembers picking mushrooms with his parents, sailing with his dad, windsurfing, and enjoying other water sports. After completing his high school in Neuss, he attended the University of Hamburg, earning his undergraduate and graduate degrees there. In Hamburg Markus met Uli Barth.

Uli had gone with friends to a dancehall in Hamburg. At one point she boldly introduced herself to a nearby table of young people. Markus Hecker happened to be at that table, and the rest, as the saying goes, is history! They married in 1998 in Hamburg. Their son Jan was born in Hamburg the following year. Markus was studying at the University of Hamburg qualifying for a PhD in Marine Biology in 2001. Markus began his post-doctorate research in Hamburg but was advised that doing post-doctorate research abroad would greatly expand his career opportunities. In 2002, the young family moved to East Lansing, Michigan where Markus worked in the Food Safety and Toxicology Centre, a department of Michigan State University, where he worked with Dr. John Giesy, a prominent professor and researcher in the field of environmental toxicology. Their daughter Hannah was born in Michigan in 2003, and thus holds dual German-American citizenship. The Hecker family would remain in Michigan for 5 years until 2007, when they made the move to Saskatoon where the U of S was developing one of the world's largest toxicology research centers.

Both Markus and Uli had studied the English language during their school years. However, through Markus's academic work, he had been exposed to more English than Uli, so that Markus's English was much better than Uli's by the time they arrived in the United States. Uli remembers being very nervous and unsure of herself when trying to converse with others in Lansing. And so many things were different than back "home" in Germany. Uli recalls watching the children's television program with Jan and Hanna about Caillou, an inquisitive four-year old boy fascinated by the world around him. And so they learned conversational English together. Uli is a very outgoing social person, and she quickly connected with a Moms' playgroup, which she credits with improving not only her English skills, but also giving her a sense of confidence through interaction with others.

The transition to Canada was easier than the move from Germany to the United States. Markus is still amazed, however, at the inefficiencies of Canada's immigration department, citing long delays and a confusing array of documents coupled with a very poor communication system. Nevertheless, Saskatoon became their home, and Markus became absorbed in his work as a professor/researcher in the Toxicology Centre and the School of the Environment and Sustainability of the University of Saskatchewan. The Heckers rented their first home in Sutherland while they got established. At a nearby park, a lady heard Uli and Hanna conversing in German. It turned out that his lady taught a Preschool program directed at German



*Making lanterns for St. Martin's Day during Covid times.*



*Uli engrossed in her work.*

children in Brevort Park School, which was called "German Pre-Kindergarten". Uli enrolled Hanna in the program, and shortly after Uli was asked to take over as teacher of the school. And so began their introduction to the close German community in Saskatoon. Uli eventually changed the name of the program to the Hansel and Gretel Preschool, and became its lead teacher, principal and administrator! While all 3- and 4-year old children are welcome, the program has a distinctive German background. The passion which Uli brings to this program and the dedication she devotes to the children is obvious to anyone who meets her. As well Uli taught German to elementary-school children through the Saskatoon German Language School for 11 years. This is how she met Gabi Waidelich-Harrison who is currently Executive Director of the Saskatchewan German Council. Uli served a full eight years as a director with the Saskatchewan German Council.

The Heckers soon decided they wanted a home of their own. Not finding anything to their liking at the time, their realtor convinced them to consider purchasing an acreage and having a house custom built for them. Uli did not even know what the word "acreage" meant! But they quickly appreciated the attractions of the rural setting, and were able to move, in March of 2008, into their beautiful new home a few kilometers beyond the eastern outskirts of Saskatoon. Uli and Markus are now committed Saskatchewanians! Uli recalls that in the first years, they would say they were "going



back home” whenever they traveled back to Germany to visit family and friends. Now, she says, they still use that term, but only when they are in Germany, and they are getting ready to leave for “back home” in Saskatchewan.



*“Home” at Christmas time enjoying the Weihnachtsmärkte and mulled wine.*

Christmas is Uli’s favorite time of year, but also the time of year when she is most homesick for Germany. She misses the Weihnachtsmärkte or Christmas markets, the German Christmas traditions and the Christmas atmosphere in Germany which is more traditional than here in Canada. She still likes to decorate a “real” Christmas tree and would prefer to put it up only on December 24, but has learned that if she waits that long, all the good trees have already been sold. Uli refuses to consider anything but a “real” Christmas tree. Uli loves to share her German culture and traditions, so at Christmas time, all of the Hecker neighbors are invited to share some mulled wine and Christmas cookies around a large outdoor fire.

When asked, Uli will admit to missing the foods and restaurants of Germany, especially the outdoor restaurants in the town market squares. She misses the architecture of Germany’s towns and cities, and she misses the way Germans celebrate their culture. She still admires the formalities of German life and the detailed attention to appearances which are obvious in homes, on the streets, in the shops and restaurants, and in commercial buildings.

However, much Uli may miss Germany and things about Germany, they cannot compete with what she has come to enjoy, and appreciate, about her new life in Saskatchewan. The pace of life here is so much slower, she says, and not nearly as hectic. People are so friendly, and always happy to help. People in Saskatchewan seem so “down-to-earth”; they are less self-centered than Germans. She finds the casual atmosphere in Saskatchewan to be very relaxing, even if that attention to detail and concern for appearances is sometimes lacking. She loves her acreage and her home, something totally unobtainable in Germany. Here, she says, “you can hear the quiet.” That is, when the coyotes are not yipping on a cold winter’s night, and the northern lights seem close enough to touch. Saskatchewan, Uli admits, has turned her into a true nature-lover. Her children grew up, camping on weekends, learning to love the outdoors.



*A “real” Canadian. Chopping trees warms you twice!*

When asked, Markus echoes many of Uli’s thoughts. He too misses the old buildings and the architecture of Germany and Europe. Markus too mentioned the attention to detail, and the atmosphere of the restaurants and the town squares, so noticeable in Germany once a person has lived somewhere else. He admits to having the luxury of living in both worlds, as his work often involves travel to Germany and Europe. (Markus is in India as I am writing this article!)

Markus related an interesting story which, he feels, illustrates the contrast of life in Saskatchewan with life in Germany. Shortly after their arrival in Saskatoon, Markus and Uli were having lunch on the rooftop of the Yard & Flagon Pub on Broadway Avenue. A nearby couple heard them

speaking German and realized they were newcomers. They introduced themselves, and two days later, Markus and Uli were invited to a backyard barbecue at the couple's home. That, says Markus, would never happen in Germany. "People here, in the community, and at work, are so welcoming."

Despite his first impressions of Saskatchewan that it was cold, and there were no trees (because they first landed in Regina!), he now lives surrounded by trees in a lightly forested area, and he has come



*Trying hard to enjoy the winters during the early years in Canada.*

to embrace the climate. "I really now prefer the weather here, as compared to the climate in Germany." Markus loves the outdoors. Germany has no true natural areas left, he says, except for high alpine zones. The countryside in Germany has been cultivated for over 1000 years. Here he can find wilderness and un-touched natural areas within a two-hour drive. He loves to hunt and fish, and recently took up bow-hunting, "to give the deer a fairer chance!" He loves Saskatchewan's lakes. Both Uli and Markus love camping and hiking, and they are planning to hike the West Coast Trail (Pacific Rim National Park Reserve) in 2023, to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

And to complete his conversion to being a true Canadian, Markus took up hockey a few years ago, and plays regularly in a U of S Faculty Recreation League at the Merlis Belcher Arena.

Work, and his profession, brought Markus to Saskatchewan, where he found a work environment that values his expertise and encourages his passion for sharing and collaboration. His research work now involves a lot of travel as he, and the Toxicology Centre, collaborate with universities around the world. Markus stresses that the University of Saskatchewan has collaborative arrangements with several excellent universities in Germany.

To date, Markus and Uli live in Saskatchewan under Canada's Permanent Resident (PR) status, but the renewal process every five years has become a nuisance to them, and they have begun to look into obtaining dual German-Canadian citizenship. Markus says he wants the right to vote so that he can have a voice as to who should represent his interests at all levels of government. He wants a voice as to how his tax dollars are spent. One complication involves Hanna who already holds both German and American citizenship. And apparently it is not so easy to voluntarily give up one's American citizenship, especially because she was born in the USA.

Both Markus and Uli recognize that Saskatoon is a small city, but it has all the services one needs, and the natural outdoors are so easily accessible. They cannot imagine living anywhere else. The Heckers are a very social family. Their passions for life, and for their German heritage, and for their love of Saskatchewan are quickly obvious. Equally obvious are Uli's passion for teaching, and Markus's passion for toxicology research. Together they represent the best of Germany here in Saskatchewan and Canada.