

## New passions

By Ellen Ashton-Haiste

It might be interviewing Oprah or the Dalai Lama. It might be exploring an exotic location – Morocco, Thailand, the Australian rain forest or the legendary Indonesian island of Bali. It might be a front-row seat at the Olympic games, a royal wedding or a royal funeral.

Any of these experiences might seem like a fantasy for most people. But it's been all in a day's work for Valerie Pringle over the last 35 years.

"I've been a lucky girl. I've travelled all over the world and I've talked to amazing people," says the broadcaster, who's well remembered for her early-morning smiles during almost nine years on CTV's Canada AM.

Despite those seminal achievements, there's nothing of the diva in this Canadian celebrity who comes across during an interview like the neighbour down the street. In conversation, she's just as quick to wax enthusiastic about her more recent charitable endeavours as she is to drop names from her broadcasting past. A recent passion, stemming from her daughter's mentalhealth problems, has been a mother-daughter speaking partnership on behalf of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

A graduate of the Radio and Television Arts program at Toronto's Ryerson College in 1974, Pringle started out at Toronto radio station CFRB and eventually moved on to CBC-TV as co-host, for eight years, with its Midday news and current-affairs program.

But she admits it's Canada AM that most people remember. One of her first big assignments there was cohosting the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994 (the same year she co-hosted the Gemini Awards show, appropriate since she has been nominated seven times).

The current-affairs shows offered opportunities to participate in some of the front-page news events of the 20th century; along with the Olympics she mentions space launches, the royal wedding of Sarah Ferguson and Prince Andrew (1986) and the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales (1997).

It also offered the occasion to interview some of the most famous people of that century, "from the Dalai Lama to Oprah to Jean Vanier – you got to talk to

everybody,” Pringle says. “The access and your ability to get into people’s lives, albeit briefly, was stunning.”

Today, when she makes appearances as a guest speaker, she talks about the five people she has interviewed who most impressed her: Winfrey, Leonard Cohen, the Canadian humanitarian Vanier, June Callwood and Oscar Peterson. “I just love them.” An eclectic grouping, she allows, but, surprisingly, says it wasn’t hard to pick the top five from among so many she has admired. “You think of people who really made an impact, who really taught you something.”

And, in daily TV, there was also a personal aspect: “To be part of people’s lives – when you do a daily show and you’re in their homes and in their bedrooms, their kitchens, you become part of their lives and you know that. It’s a daily broadcasting thing that is wonderful.”

But, after 23 years – she quit in 2001 – it was time for a change. “It was a wonderful job, but it was enough,” she says. “One minute you’re interviewing Northrup Frye and the next minute you’re interviewing Tom Selleck – that actually happened one day – you’re doing things like cooking segments and then Desmond Tutu. And that’s what makes morning shows fun. I think it really did suit me. But, at a certain point you go, ‘oh my god, Christmas toys again’ or ‘oh my god, another St. Patrick’s Day.’ And you say ‘I think I’ve done this enough.’”

Enough, also, of getting up at 4 a.m., although Pringle says it worked well for a mom raising a family. “Quite frankly, it allowed me to live a normal life with my kids because I’d be home in the afternoon and able to take them to do stuff, which was important to me.”

And how did her three children – now aged from 29 to 23 – cope with a famous mom? After all, the Banff Television Foundation selected her as one of the “Fifty Famous Faces of Fifty Years of Canadian Television.”

“Occasionally, it was a benefit if someone they thought was cool was on Canada AM and they could come up and see them, but mostly it wasn’t a big deal to them,” says Pringle.”

Does she miss the day-to-day journalism rush? Not on your life!

“I hug myself black and blue, eight years later, while I’m having coffee at eight in the morning, at home, talking to my dog. I mean, I read the newspaper and I’m interested in politics to a degree but not with the sense you have when you’re doing a daily show. Life changes your focus. I’m 56 now and it just doesn’t hold the same kind of drive. It’s time for this run to end and time to do something else.”

For Pringle that “something else,” initially, was globetrotting.

Just after she left Canada AM, CTV obtained a licence for digital channels that included a travel channel, and a friend proposed the idea for what would become the show *Valerie Pringle Has Left The Building*. It turned out to be, in her words, “the greatest job ever.” After some hesitation, she wrote down all the places in the world she had always wanted to see and “we just hit the road.”

With a small crew of three and a low budget, she completed three seasons of 10 locations, ranging from the Grand Canyon to the Cook Islands and Dublin to the Dalmatian coast city of Dubrovnik, with its historic structures and post-war appeal.

The third season focused on Canadian locations and Pringle says, “I was really happy to show Canadians places they should be travelling in this country.” Highlights, she says were destinations like the Queen Charlotte Islands (just renamed Haida Gwaii by the BC government) and the northern peninsula of Newfoundland.

Then, she began traversing the country again as host of the *Canadian Antiques Roadshow*. “It was a charming show to do,” Pringle enthuses. “Lovely talking to people about their families and their history, what objects they saved and what they meant to them, learning the history of Canada that way.”

Both the travel series and *Antiques Roadshow* are now in repeats and while Pringle is eyeing proposals for new documentaries, today she is focusing on her work with non-profit organizations and projects.

She’s chair of the board from the new *Trans Canada Trail*, which she says is about 70 per cent completed and for which she will be carrying the Olympic torch, somewhere between Squamish and Whistler, B.C. just before the Games begin.

She’s also a member of the Foundation Boards for the Canadian Broadcast Museum, Women’s College Hospital, The Niagara Project, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health as well as spokesperson for the Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research.

The mental health work is particularly close to her heart, given that her daughter Catherine has suffered from severe anxiety attacks. A recent report from the *Sault Star* revealed, “Catherine, a communications expert, turned to CAMH (the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) when her panic and anxiety attacks brought her to a halt while she was working as deputy press secretary on one of her first political campaigns.

“I’m lucky enough with my mom, to have visibility on that, so whenever I have the ability to speak on it, I do, to get more people talking,” Catherine Pringle told the Star.

Says her mother, “I started by agreeing to do some fundraising and awareness for CAMH with my daughter, and the response was so overwhelming, people coming up and saying they’d never spoken about these things. It’s absolutely reinforced how much work needs to be done regarding stigma and making people comfortable to talk about mental illness. And demanding the proper amount of dollars for mental-health care and research and treatment.”

She’s also enthusiastic about the Niagara Project, which would involve the development of a new national park on the shoreline of Lake Ontario in Niagara-On-The-Lake – where Pringle and her husband, Andy, have purchased and are restoring a historic home – along with a 10-week international music festival in an outdoor amphitheatre overlooking the lake.

Since the television work has diminished, the not-forprofit work has “ramped up,” Pringle says. “And, now, I’m quite happy to be focusing on that.”

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