

One Last Cast for Dad to Remember (Calgary Herald Sept. 6, 1999)

She stands knee-deep in the water, silhouetted in the sunset's waning glow.

It's so dark she can no longer see her fly on the water. But still she casts, gracefully and confidently, hopeful for one last trout.

Kneeling on the nearby bank, her father watches silently, proud yet a little sad. He wills a trout to take the fly, to provide sweet icing for this last outing before their lives change forever.

But it is not to be. Time to go, he tells her. Just one more cast, she replies. Just one more cast.

The father smiles. He recalls the first time she uttered those words. It was on their first fishing trip together, 15 years ago.

She was just two and one-half years old when they were invited to fish a stocked farm dugout. She helped her father dig the worms in the garden, then eagerly pitched in to pack the gear. Bubbling with excitement as the rods were rigged up, she insisted on casting her own after he showed her how.

She shrieked with joy when the first trout hit her bait, almost wrenching the rod from her tiny hands. Her first fish.

An angler was born; the father had a new fishing partner and a fresh outlook on a sport he'd loved since childhood. The circle was complete.

When it came time to leave the dugout, that little girl said – for the first of many times to come – those four magical words that is music to a father who fishes: Just one more cast.

The father packed up and still she sat, big brown eyes transfixed on the bobber floating on the pond's surface. When she finally, and reluctantly, got in the car, she recounted the outing all the way home, then provided her mother with a detailed narrative about each fish.

Over the next 15 years, father and daughter fished together regularly, sharing conversations about fish and life, spectacular terrain, wildlife encounters – the trio of swimming moose at that high alpine lake was a once-in-a-lifetime highlight – cold dunkings, sunsets and other rich experiences which malls and video arcades can't provide.

She developed a deep concern for clean water, litter-free banks, healthy fish and habitat, fishing ethics and wildlife. Her commitment to catch-and-release became so absolute she'd good-naturedly rebuke her dad for keeping the odd brook trout for lunch.

While her skills and confidence grew, many of her questions tested her father's knowledge of fishing and the outdoors. He answered them as well as he could, but knew many responses fell short.

When her younger sister was old enough to join them on outings, she eagerly helped teach her how to fish. Together, they'd catch night crawlers by flashlight in the backyard the night before a walleye-fishing trip. They delighted in holding up writhing double handfuls of the slimy critters, then knocking on the window to get the attention of their mother, who hates night crawlers.

Three years and many trips to lakes, ponds and small creeks after her farm pond initiation, the father one day thought his oldest daughter was ready for a larger river.

After helping set up his five-year-old partner on the riverbank overlooking a deep hole full of promise, he started casting his own line a few yards away. That's when she informed him, sweetly but firmly, that he would have to move because this was her spot.

After she got into fly-fishing at age 11, the daughter and father hiked into a high mountain lake renowned for its feisty cutthroat trout. She wasted no time rigging up. Before he'd made his first cast, she'd released three trout hooked on a dry fly.

Once, they reluctantly agreed not to bring fishing tackle on a group hike to a pretty set of waterfalls on a clear mountain stream. But the plan changed when they got there. Several brookies were rising to eat hatching insects. The daughter insisted on breaking out flies, split shot and fishing line from the survival kit, then promptly landed a trout with the emergency tackle tied to a willow branch.

One spring, she caught a 20-inch bull trout, the biggest the father had seen. She gently cradled the fish in the water, reassuring it of its safety with soft, soothing words, until it regained enough strength to swim away.

A few years ago, the father noticed his daughter was changing. A little girl no more, she started fishing apart from him, politely but firmly declining advice about fly selection, where to cast and just about everything else.

This sense of independence grew stronger in everything she did, from schoolwork to social life and all things in between. A confident, self-motivated young woman had emerged, seemingly overnight.

When darkness finally chased her off the river the night of that final outing, she insisted on driving her father home, the first time ever after a fishing trip. Silently, he wrestled with feelings of sadness, joy and pride.

As they travel this morning to the University of Lethbridge, where the biological sciences program should provide many answers her father couldn't, he'll face similar emotions.

And he'll wish they'd shared just one more cast before she left.