

# behind the banker



Eric Bjella and his partner Tricia.  
Photos courtesy Rod Whitten Photography



# Eric Bjella

## BANKER | WEARABLE ART SHOW PRODUCER

By Andee Rose, Vice President - Marketing & Communications Director, Oregon Bankers Association

**E**ric Bjella (pronounced bee-yell-uh) grew up in the port town of Silver Bay on the north shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota. He obtained his college degree a few hours south at the University of Minnesota where he graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing. Following college, a former roommate convinced Eric to join him in Alaska to seek employment. Eric, open to some adventure, packed his bags, sold his truck, and bought a one-way ticket to Juneau.

Eric landed his first job in Alaska at a local community bank, where so many do, on the teller line. Over the course of what would become a 32-year banking career, Eric had the opportunity to wear many hats. He learned the ropes as an operations officer, consumer loan officer, real estate loan officer, commercial loan officer and branch manager. Eric's career eventually led him to assume the responsibility of leading the marketing department at First Bank in Ketchikan, Alaska. In his role as vice president, Eric oversaw all advertising, public relations, promotional campaigns and community development activities.

After 22 years at First Bank, Eric decided it was finally time to move to the lower 48. In 2008, Eric and his partner Tricia settled in the community of Ocean Shores, Washington. He took a one year hiatus from banking before joining Bank of the Pacific as vice president and marketing manager, a position he holds today.

When Eric and Tricia made the decision to settle in Ocean Shores, it was in part because of the town's convention center. Back in Ketchikan, they had been involved in something called a "wearable art show" and they wanted to bring one to Ocean Shores. In case you're wondering, a wearable art show is exactly what it sounds like: people create art that can be worn, and either the artists themselves or models display their artistic expressions on the runway for show attendees.

The dream of producing their own wearable art show literally landed in their lap when Eric and Tricia learned that an acquaintance of theirs happened to be the producer of a wine festival in Ocean Shores. Their acquaintance felt that adding a wearable art show to the festival would make for a great entertainment element. So, in 2012, Eric and Tricia took the plunge and produced their first show, drawing a crowd of over 200 people.

The success of their first show provided Eric and Tricia the assurance needed to make a go of it as a standalone production. The Ocean Shores Wearable Art Show will celebrate six years this June and is expected to draw nearly 350 people. In addition to providing a forum for artists and designers to display their work in a fun, safe and encouraging environment, Eric sees the show as a way to support the local community.

The array of skills Eric picked up along his banking career has proven to be a valuable asset in his role as producer of the event, which is a true labor of love. Preparation for the Ocean Shores

Wearable Art Show begins a good eight months in advance. Eric handles every aspect from recruiting and managing volunteers, soliciting artists and entries, handling the needs of each unique entry, identifying people to operate sound, lighting, video and photography, and working with the event venue. This list does not include all the efforts that go into promoting the show, which is also extensive. In addition to creating various forms of promotional collateral, Eric and Tricia make rounds to local radio shows and talk to anyone who will listen.



All the hard work finally starts to take shape two days prior to the show when the stage and runway are set. The night before, a full rehearsal with the emcee and models is conducted to practice order and timing. The preparation can only go so far, however, as live events have a way of bringing surprises. During a live show, the typical evening for Eric involves running between the backstage and front of house addressing "a million minor catastrophes that happen in live theatre," as Eric describes.

The live show begins with Eric taking the stage to welcome the crowd, introducing the opening act and the emcee, and then "letting things fly." Eric describes the evening for him as "riding a go-kart down a steep hill with no brakes for 90 minutes." But Eric somehow finds the will to carry on. "I've found that even when things don't go right and you might be feeling like it is time to let it all go, you still have a bit more to give."

Despite its challenges, producing the Ocean Shores Wearable Art Show has been a rewarding endeavor for Eric. The positive feedback from audience members has been uplifting, including the fact that people travel from all parts of Washington year after year because they simply can't miss it. For Eric, the most important thing about the show is its community benefit and providing a place where artists and models of all kinds can show off their creation in a supportive and non-competitive environment.

Eric is a strong believer that a career in banking is really a career in caring about the community. "Whether it is a small town on an island in Alaska or a major metropolitan area, community bankers are a driving force in keeping their community vibrant and growing. From direct cash donations to the arts, education and social services to lending management and financial expertise to local nonprofit boards, community banks and their employees truly care about their communities. I'm proud to be part of this professional family."

Learn more about Eric's wearable art show, taking place June 3, 2017 in Ocean Shores, Washington at [www.oswearableart.com](http://www.oswearableart.com). ■

◀ This glow-in-the-dark flapper dress was crafted by Eric's partner Tricia and her daughter. It has been modeled in multiple shows and featured in Alaska Airline's in-flight magazine.