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Though Jesper Kruse Hails from Denmark, He loves Living in Maine

by Pamela Chodosh

A builder of energy-efficient homes, Jesper Kruse founded Maine Passive House a little over a decade ago. He lives in Greenwood with Martha McLean, his wife of 22 years. Their daughter will be a senior, and their son will be a junior, both at Telstar High School. The rest of Kruse's family remains in Denmark, including his father, who is 82.

I was born in Tisvildeleje, Denmark. It used to be a fishing village, but now it's a tourist place. I call it the Martha's Vineyard of Denmark. It's not my cup of tea.

I have two older brothers and an older sister. I am my mother and father's only biological child. Both of my parents were social workers. My dad also trained to be a cabinet maker.

I had a great childhood. I went to school, played soccer, and rode my bike all around. I never had curfews. My parents believed if you gave children a lot of room to run, they would reign themselves in.

I graduated from high school in '87 and went to Alaska to visit a friend of my parents. He trained sled dogs. I ended up spending the winter with him.

That spring, he and the woman he lived with decided to move to Maine. They bought a U-Haul and made the front into an RV and the back into a place for their sled dogs. A friend of mine from Denmark came over to drive with us. We spent 17 days traveling down the Alaskan Highway and across the United States. Once we got to Maine, my friend and I got dropped off. He went back home, and I toured the US.

When I returned to Denmark, I found a brochure from Outward Bound that my friend from Alaska had given me. I called him to see if he knew of any work. He had just given all his sled dogs to Kevin Slater of Mahoosuc Guide Service. Kevin needed help.

I came to Maine to help with the sled dogs. After two weeks, there was not much work. Kevin suggested I volunteer with Outward Bound.

That summer, I worked with groups of adjudicated youth in an Outward Bound course in Florida. We'd get the kids for four weeks and paddle around in Florida's swamps. It was a huge culture shock to be in the swamp with those kids. I learned a lot more than they did.

I taught courses for Outward Bound for two winters through the Immigration Service's Teacher Exchange Program.

I returned to Denmark. There was this Turkish guy who ran a kiosk I went to. He'd always tell me, "My uncle in Turkey has a bus company. He can give you a free ride." That's how a bunch of my friends and I got from Copenhagen to Turkey. While we were in Turkey, the group broke up. I traveled on to Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, and then I spent six months in India.

Being in India was like being in a movie. You'd see people dying, and then people riding bikes with more stuff than you can ever imagine. There was so much going on in the streets, sometimes I would just stand still and watch as the world



flew by.

I traveled around the world on-and-off for about five years. Then in '92, I went to college outside of Copenhagen to study social work. Though eventually, I decided it was not what I wanted to do, it has come in handy.

The college required us to do internships, which they encouraged us to do abroad. That gave me a chance to spend six months at Outward Bound. I met Martha right before I was about to go back to Denmark. I thought I would never see her again.

One night when I came home from a concert, my roommate said, "Hey, some girl called from the US."

I told my friend, "This girl is beautiful. I really like her." My friend said, "Send her a ticket."

I called Martha and said, "If you want to come visit, I'll pay."

Within a year we went from seeing each other to falling in love. We went back and forth between the US and Denmark. I planned to come to the US over the summer to do another teacher exchange program when Martha called and said I couldn't get another visa.

We thought, "Why don't we just get married. We'll tell no one. That way, if it doesn't work out, we can just get divorced."

We called Nancy Graver. She said, "I can do it on Friday." We arrived, she took the phone off the hook, and we got married on her front porch with a couple of friends who were visiting. After the ceremony, she said, "Do you want a Coors Light while we do the paperwork?"

The following year Martha and I had a real wedding. We knew we would be together. My parents came for the wedding and then came after we built our house. My mom loved kids. Once we had them, she would come two or three times a year and stay a few weeks. Around the time Martha was helping her parents turn their camp into a year-round place, we got our land in Greenwood.

We went to Denmark in 2006 to spend a year. We wanted the kids to be a little Danish. While we were there, I went to a bachelor party. I sat next to a guy who was a builder. He worked in sustainability. I asked, "What's the latest?" He told me about passive house standards and how they reduced heating by 80 to 90 percent. That stayed with me. That's how I got interested in green building.

I started Maine Passive House in '08 or '09. I've recently gone from being a builder to managing a crew of ten, an office, and an office manager. I really like it, but sometimes I miss the camaraderie of being out there.

There is something about going to your pickup at the end of the day and saying, "Wow, look at what we did today." Now, what I say is "Look at all paper I got off my desk." I'm fortunate. I have such great people working for me. I feel so grateful.