From her station behind the DJ deck onstage, Gizem Aksay, MBA ’15, has an electrifying view of the undulating crowd. It’s a sea of white; the air pulses with the bass from the music she’s playing. Thousands of guests from both near and far have donned their most elegant whites and gathered at a top-secret location to be part of this unforgettable, invitation-only event, which Aksay and her team have been working on for months. It’s the after-party crescendo of another successful Dîner en Blanc, Canada’s largest and most anticipated annual public picnic, and for Aksay, it’s a peak moment: the culmination of months of work promoting the event and the chance to indulge her favourite pastime as a DJ.

Occasional DJ and full-time marketing professional, Aksay is digital communications director for The Social Concierge, an event branding and marketing agency that specializes in curating a signature portfolio of designer events including the iconic Dîner en Blanc in Vancouver. First held in Paris in 1988, the concept of the event is that a secret location is divulged to a select group of people, who dress all in white and flash-gather in a public area to create a chic dining space where they enjoy good food, wine and company—and an after-party. The tradition has blossomed in cities all around the world and is a mainstay of the social scene in Vancouver and Victoria. To give a sense of the scope of the logistics involved in this undertaking, Vancouver’s 2016 event saw nearly 6,000 diners.

“The events industry can be extremely stressful,” says Aksay. “It just takes one thing to go wrong and then all your hard work comes undone. So many details, so many possibilities. But when it comes together, and you see people connecting and having fun, well, there’s something very special about creating an unforgettable experience.”

For Aksay, her role at the Vancouver-based company, with its emphasis on designer events, is a true departure from her life pre-MBA. Born and raised in Istanbul, Turkey, Aksay’s previous roles were product focused, having worked as an IT and communications specialist.
with LG Electronics and Klikks. “I believe in experiences, those moments that make one’s life prettier. Today my ‘product’ is people, whether that’s locals or tourists, and I love it,” says Aksay.

She says it is thanks to her experience at the Sauder S. Gill Graduate School and the exposure it gave her to fellow students, who represented different ages, backgrounds and walks of life, that her eyes were opened to a service industry focused on people. “At Gustavson, for the first time in my life I was creating projects with such a diverse group. It made me appreciate and understand the differences and taught me how to deal with, and take the lead in, a variety of environments. It gives you a very holistic approach, and with Gustavson’s consulting project placements across a placement at The Social Concierge on service management and she came in useful to defuse a situation. “We are working with a lot of tight deadlines, dealing with late nights and various campaigns and partners for such different events. It can become a very stressed environment, so being able to make fast decisions, plan and manage projects and people is an essential part of my job. I can honestly say my MBA experience helped me to deal with these situations.”

So how does Aksay relax? Aside from travelling to warm places and dining out in her free time, she adds.

It was during her final year that several opportunities presented themselves. It was just such a natural transition. It was a role where I could take all the soft skills I had developed during my MBA, such as decision-making under pressure, leadership and teamwork, and combine them with my digital marketing experience and my passion for making people happy.”

Aksay leads a small team that includes a social media producer and digital platforms specialist, and at times, her MBA prowess has come in useful to defuse a situation. “We are working with a lot of tight deadlines, dealing with late nights and various campaigns and partners for such different events. It can become a very stressed environment, so being able to make fast decisions, plan and manage projects and people is an essential part of my job. I can honestly say my MBA experience helped me to deal with these situations.”

Aksay takes the stage as DJ at Vancouver’s 2016 Diner en Blanc after party.

In 2015, Aksay received a formal offer to join full-time to oversee the growing company’s digital marketing portfolio. With events that include The Deighton Cup at Hastings Racetrack (which attracts around 5,000 equine socialites from all over Canada and the U.S.), the networking event Dinner By Design (which brings together internationally-celebrated designers and local talent), the Oktoberfest-inspired Harvest Haus, and more bespoke company events for local companies like lululemon and international clients like Nike, Aksay’s MBA skills have been extremely useful.

“Gustavson’s consulting project placements and built unforgettable experiences off of it. With 150 candles on Canada’s birthday cake this year, one of the hot topics in tourism is the free day-use access to national parks and historic sites offered by Parks Canada in 2017. While this special initiative makes hundreds of incredible national treasures more accessible, Canada’s 150 is also a golden opportunity to rediscover the uniquely magical provincial parks in the BC Parks system—which, don’t forget, are always free to enter for day-use. Leah Wilcock, MBA ’13, is a recreation and business specialist at BC Parks. “BC has the third largest parks system in North America, after Canada’s National Parks and the United States’ National Parks,” says Wilcock. “With over 1,030 parks and protected areas, there is always somewhere new to explore.” That’s a lot of mountains to climb, lakes to paddle and trails to hike. Here’s a short list of extraordinary provincial parks within this system that will get you started on experiencing all our beautiful province has to offer.

**Skagit Valley**
(South Coast)
The Skagit Valley was carved by retreating glaciers and is characterized by excellent outdoor recreation opportunities in a natural, wilderness-like setting.

**Strathcona Park**
(West Coast)
The oldest provincial park in BC. Located centrally on Vancouver Island, Strathcona Park is a rugged mountain wilderness comprising more than 250,000 hectares. Botttle Lake and Forbidden Plateau have visitor-friendly developments. The rest of the park appeals to people seeking wilderness.

**Kikomun Creek**
(Kootenay/ Okanagan)
Located in a dry, sunny area of the province, this park has Interior Douglas-firs, ponderosa pine forest and grassland habitat. Family-oriented, with paved roads.

**Lac La Hache**
(Thomson/ Cariboo)
Lac La Hache is one of the most popular recreation lakes along Highway 97. This area is rich in tales of fur traders, gold seekers and cattle ranchers.

**Liard River Hot Springs**
(North)
The second largest hot spring in Canada, Liard River Hot Springs is of national ecological significance and is well known for its natural setting in a lush boreal spruce forest.

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