

working

WATERFRONT

summer 2023



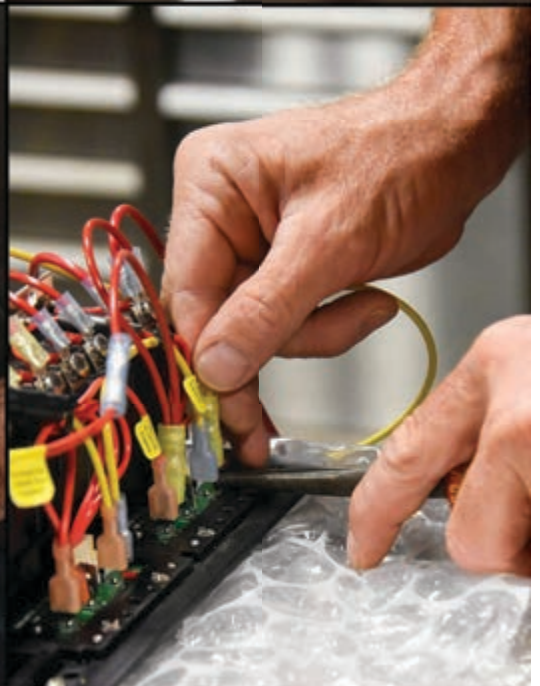
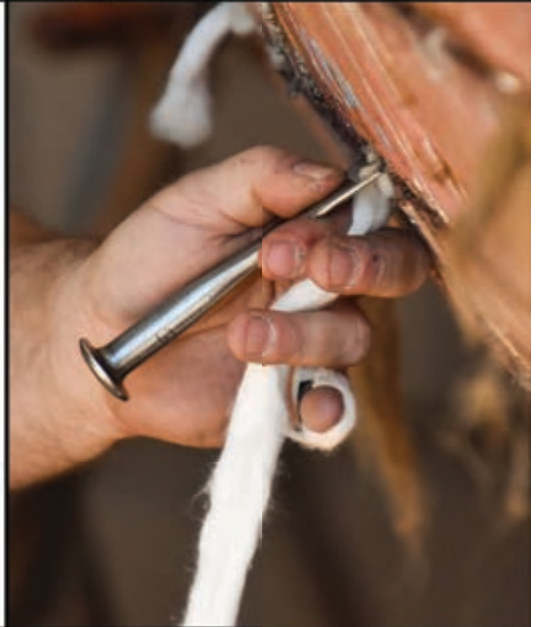
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COVER PHOTO BY JEREMY JOHNSON
A LEADER PRODUCTION

PHOTO EDITORS: JEREMY JOHNSON & LLOYD MULLEN

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: LAURA JEAN SCHNEIDER

LAYOUT & DESIGN: LLOYD MULLEN

STORIES BY: THOMAS MULLEN, JEREMY JOHNSON,
ANNA TALLARICO, JAMES SLOAN, KIRK BOXLEITNER

HOW TO GET AHOLD OF US:

LLOYD MULLEN

lloyd@ptleader.com • ptleader.com • (360) 385-2900

226 Adams St

Port Townsend, WA 98368

JEREMY JOHNSON

jeremy@jeremyjohnson.photos • jeremyjohnson.photos • (360) 477-1614

LAURA JEAN SCHNEIDER

ljschneider@ptleader.com • ptleader.com • (360) 385-2900

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Well this looks different...

by Jeremy Johnson

Working Waterfront is a collaboration between myself and the Port Townsend Leader. The positive reception of Volumes I and II of the magazine "Port Townsend Maritime" was inspirational and showed me how important it was for these stories to be told. The community I had grown to love and become a part of is so vital to our region and heritage.

Self-publishing a magazine is an enormous amount of work, especially as a 1+ person operation. And the truth is, being a publisher was never my goal. Publishing was a means to an end, a way to share the stories in an engaging and physical medium. I also knew that doing this work in black and white would limit the distribution opportunities – editors are rarely looking to print in monochrome. I also knew that the stories we were collecting were largely underrepresented. The periodicals in this genre focus on boats, businesses, or cruising. Our focus has always been the people behind the boats, and the culture of Port Townsend's working waterfront.

With only two volumes published, my collaborator Tiffany and I had proven the existence of an audience for these stories. And that's when the work started to get more difficult. Producing the magazines has been self-funded and without advertising or sponsorships. We've only barely broken even on expenses. Tiffany rediscovered her passion for her own personal projects, and I switched careers to be a full-time photographer and producer. Self-publishing took a backseat.

From early on, my goal with this work was to highlight the people and craft in our community of boat builders. There are so many wonderful stories waiting to be shared, and it is my hope that Working Waterfront and the team of writers and photographers at the Leader, with my contributions and guidance, will continue to showcase the people of the working waterfronts in Port Townsend and beyond.



So much saltwater shore left to explore

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a. publisher's note

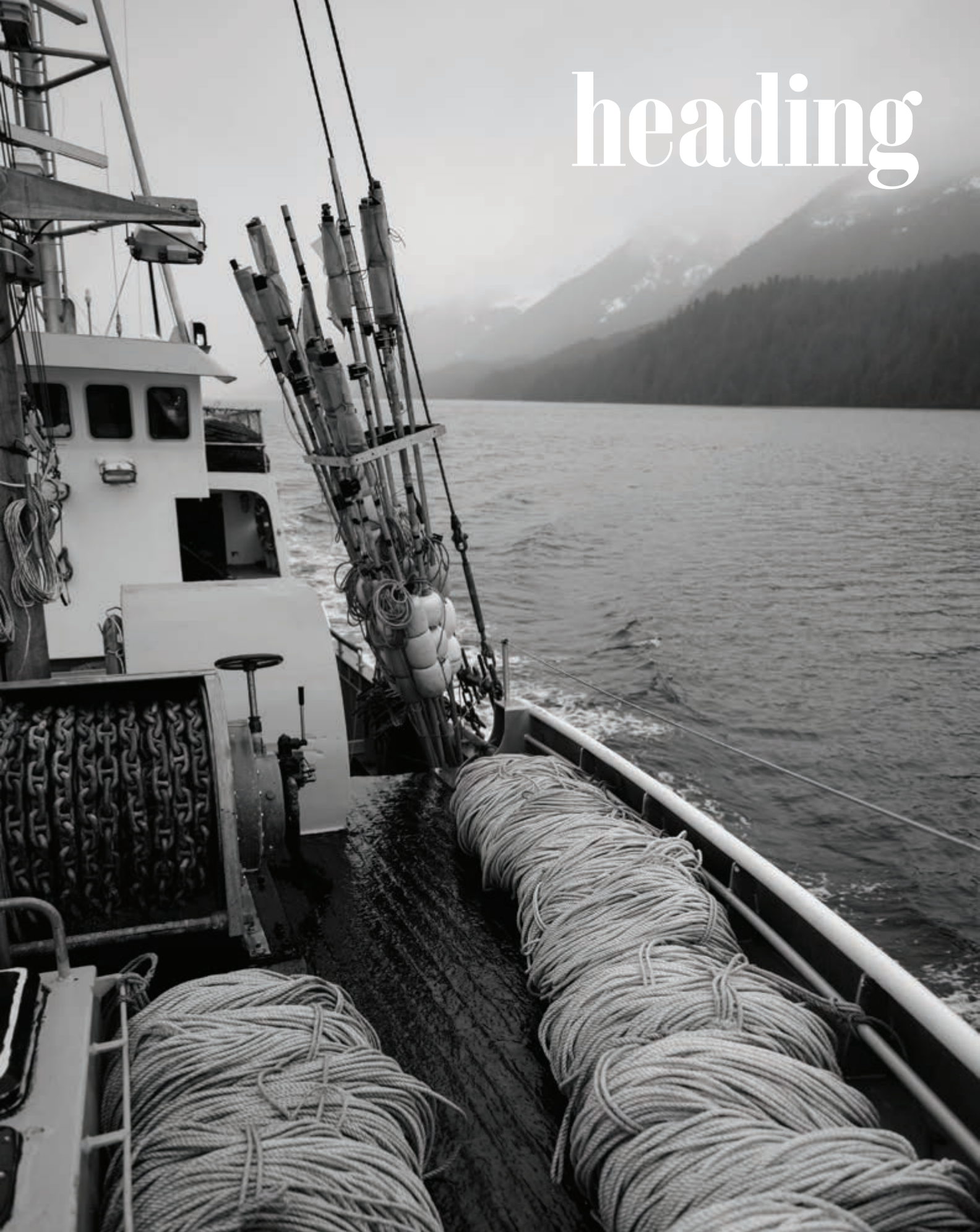
This magazine is the tangible manifestation of the old adage that two heads are better than one. It was time for The Leader's trademark Working Waterfront publication to take a different tack, and I can't think of a better partner than Jeremy Johnson to work this waterfront.

The sea lures each of our featured folks in myriad ways.

It's dangerous, mercurial, inspiring, and ultimately, a place to make a living like none other. Being able to continue Jeremy and his partner Tiffany's vision to share these specific stories—thankfully, heavy on the visuals for those of us who don't have our sea legs yet—is an absolute pleasure. Continuing in the spirit of creating partnerships, The Leader is tickled to be partnering with the recently founded Maritime Washington National Heritage Area to increase the relevance and distribution of our publication while bringing awareness to some 3,000 miles of historic waterfront. Look for our booth at the Wooden Boat Festival this year too, and in the meantime, sit back with a beer and live vicariously through the stories we're serving up this summer.

Cheers,

heading



NORTH

photography and story
by Jeremy Johnson

I can feel the motion change to a roll and sheer, a change from the bucking of FV Polaris crashing through a deep swell. We must be going through Seymour Narrows, I thought to myself coming out of a light sleep in “the coffin” – the most forward bunk at the waterline.

These old halibut schooners, built in the early 20th century, weren't built for comfort. They were built to work, and work hard. Between 1910 and 1930, more than 150 were built from locally harvested and milled lumber like Douglas fir. Originally built as dory fishers, the halibut schooners would drop men off in small boats to fish for halibut in the Bering Sea. Dory fishing was extremely dangerous and outlawed in 1930.



Ketchikan, Alaska - April 15, 2023: FV Polaris stops in Ketchikan to pick up frozen salmon to use as bait for their season of halibut fishing in the Bering Sea.



Sarah Island, Canada - April 14, 2023: Clouds and fog obscure the mountains of Sarah Island. FV Polaris motored North to Ketchikan via the Inside Passage, a waterway protected from the weather and waves of the open ocean.

Originally built to host a complement of 12 crew members, Polaris often felt cramped with only six of us aboard. Someone is always in someone's way unless you're sleeping. On a work boat, sleep is a luxury.

Five months prior, Captain Brian Dafforn invited my business partner Tyler and me along for a halibut fishing trip to document the experience. Before committing to the longer fishing trip, we opted to transit with the crew from Fisherman's Terminal in Ballard to Ketchikan. Only two days prior to departure, all the logistics finally came together, and we had a green light to join Polaris on her annual trip up the Inside Passage for another year of fishing.

After years of documenting shipwrights working on boats like Polaris, it was a different experience entirely to be on one at sea. The boat came alive. In the boat yard, a work boat, like any other boat, has always been a stage for the tradespeople to perform their craft, and I took only casual interest in the boats themselves.



Fisherman's Terminal, Washington - April 10, 2023: Captain Brian Dafforn pilots the F/V Polaris out of Lake Union on his annual trip to the Bering Sea for halibut fishing. Polaris has been continually fishing halibut since it was built in 1913 at Fisherman's Terminal.

Once at sea, with the deckhands busy prepping their fishing gear for the season, the skipper piloting the boat, the cook assembling a meal, and the boat itself plowing through the swell, I suddenly felt the soul of the boat itself. This is what Polaris was built for, over a century ago.

Suddenly the deck layout felt more important, now understanding where the hazardous areas were, where to stay dry, and how to stay out of the wind. I've learned to pay more attention to boats on the hard, as prior insignificant details have gained new importance.

When a southerly and following seas churned Dixon Passage on our way into Ketchikan, the wooden boat creaked and shuddered, pots and pans clanked, and I found myself praising our accomplished shipwrights who'd ensured the boat's integrity for another season of fishing. Our trip was coming to an end, but it felt like my journey was only beginning.



Queen Charlotte Sound, Canada - April 13, 2023: Leaving the protection of Vancouver Island, FV Polaris encountered more swell and often rolled 20-degrees or more. With enough roll, water frequently rushes through the scuppers into the well-deck.

Bellingham, Washington - April 12, 2023: Frozen salmon in the bait freezer on FV Polaris. Captain Brian Dafforn bought and stored hundreds of pounds of chum salmon last year to use in the 2023 season. The crew unloaded several totes of frozen salmon and squid onto the boat before heading to Alaska.



artistic connections

story by Kirk Boxleitner
photography by Lloyd Mullen

W/

Maria Melito not only divides her time between Iceland, Alaska and the Olympic Peninsula, but she also divides her breadth of artistic talent between a diverse assortment of disciplines, from painting and photography to sculpting, woodworking, bone-carving and bronze-casting (the latter with some assistance).

The common theme uniting all of Melito's work is her affinity for nature and the aquatic world, but what sets Melito's artwork apart from her similarly environmentally minded peers in the art field is the directness of her connection to marine life, which makes her creations not so much constructed as organic, literally.

By the time she was 8 years old, Melito was accustomed to fishing excursions with her father, but it wasn't until she explored the anatomy of one of those fish, at her grandmother's place, that she realized, "Wow, it's got ink inside its eyes. I bet I could paint with this," she said during a recent chat.

Although Melito continued to experiment with her artistic inclinations across the roughly two decades that followed, it wasn't until the past five years that she began pursuing a professional art career, although her methods have remained as unconventional as ever.



Steinbitsgríma - This mask is a part of Melito's body of work called, "Sea Spirits." Melito invites the viewer to step into contemplation and conversation with the deep. The materials that she uses to fabricate the Sea Spirits are from the skin of an Icelandic wolf fish and kelp from a remote bay in the west fjords of Iceland.



aquatic life

Port Townsend, Washington - June 13, 2023: Maria Melito floats off the docks at Pope Marine Park. Melito free dives and gathers plants and other aquatic life to create art.

Salmon skin and kelp might strike others as especially fragile foundations for artistic creations, but Melito knows how to cure salmon and wolf eel skins, stripping them of their oils and fats to tan them into leather, which she then fashions into decorative items ranging from masks and baskets to lanterns and lampshades.

While such ephemeral finds can be made more durable, Melito appreciates how they represent relatively fleeting moments in time, as with a halibut whose size inspired her to preserve its dimensions via an inked print on raw mulberry bark paper.





“It’s so fibrous that it’s almost more fabric than paper,” Melito said. “You apply the ink to the fish, then gently press it into the paper, to capture its contours in the print. I was impressed by how large the halibut was, so I saved its size to tell a story. I was encouraged by my family to explore my environment, and to connect with nature in a number of different ways.”

Melito has since created prints of lingcod, rock and skate fish, and an octopus, but she emphasized that she cherishes such animals on more than a merely aesthetic level.

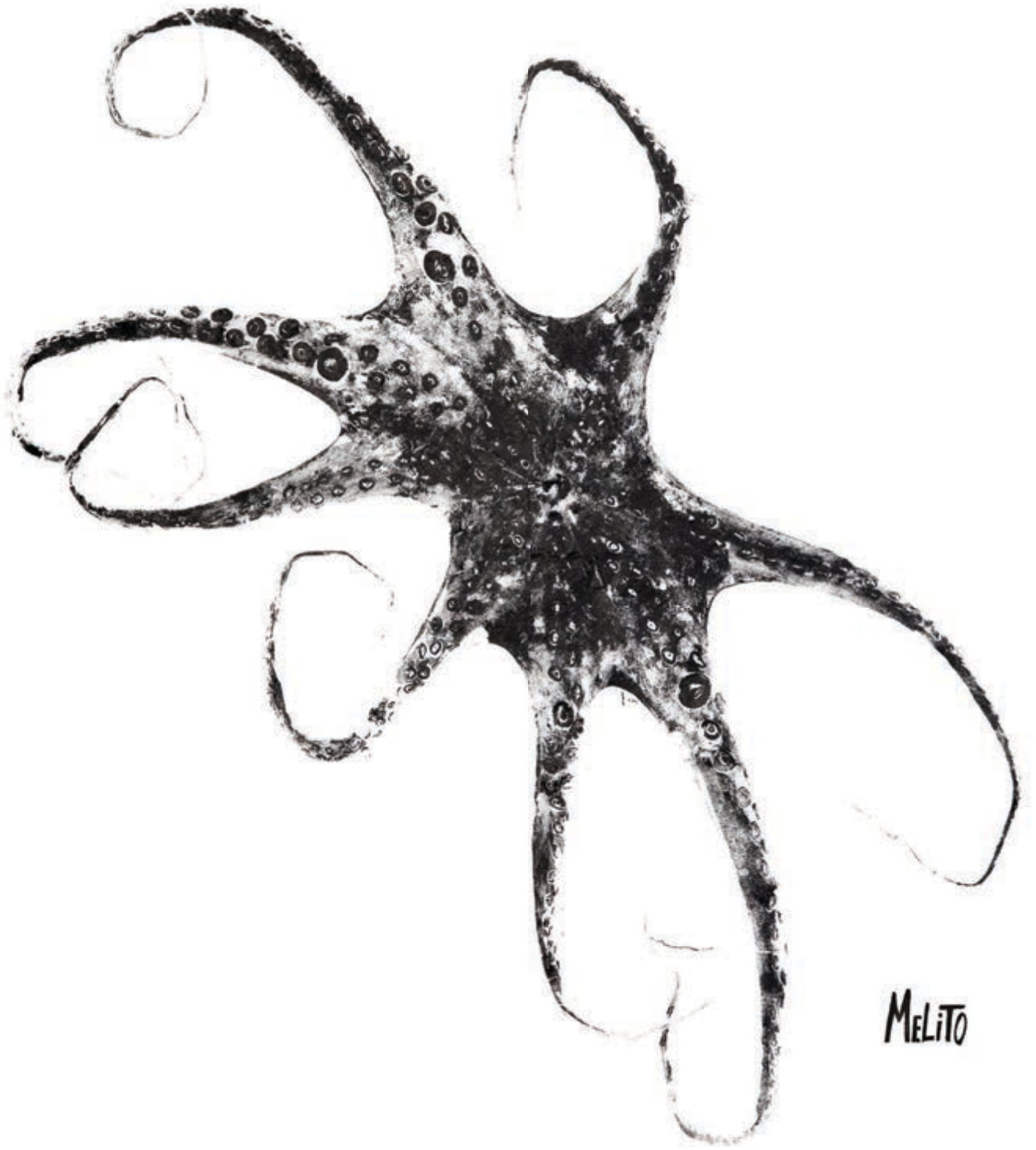
“I was brought up by my family around a lot of fish, and I feel really bonded to fish,” Melito said. “They’re an embodiment of a part of myself. I eat the fish; I love the fish; I am the fish.”

Melito pointed to another one of her artistic works, a watercolor painting of a wolf eel and a human woman hugging each other, to indicate her “awe and adoration” toward sea creatures.

Melito admitted she sometimes finds it difficult to express her emotions regarding the “deep, spiritual connection” she feels toward marine life, so she uses her art not only to communicate her relationships to such aquatic animals, but also to attempt to speak, on their behalf.

“I try to tell stories that interpret what they experience,” Melito said. “I love immersing myself in that water world, and my art allows me to justify my continual inquiries into that realm.”

When she’s able to take a moment to herself, to sit by “the stillness of the evening water” in Discovery Bay, Melito is reminded of the underlying message she hopes her work conveys: “To invite our people to remember their connections to nature, (because) that it is what we are made of. We belong with and to nature; as the Moon does, so to the Earth, and just as the Moon pulls on the tides of the Earth, so too does nature move the tides of our own being,” she said.



Pacific Northwest fish on mulberry bark paper

To create these pieces of art, Melina painted the fish then gently pressed mulberry paper bark onto them.



an old-school way

of doing business

Photography and
story by James Sloan

It's not just about the fish, although Key City Fish Company owner Johnpaul Davies knows quality critters when he sees them.

It's also about the customer.

"We've got an old-school way of doing business, which I think is refreshing and adventurous for people," Davies said. "That's the main thing, is keeping the old-school way of being a seafood and meat market alive and strong.

"You're not going to find that in every town in America, so I think that's what keeps people coming back," he added. Headquartered in the heart of Port Townsend's maritime community at Boat Haven and approaching 30 years as Port Townsend's premier fish and meat market, Davies credits his staff, the support of the local community, and the shop's old-school style of business for carrying Key City Fish Co. through recent changes brought on by you-know-what.

"We saw basically a virtual decimation of our wholesale business and significant growth in our retail business as we had to reinvent ourselves," Davies said.

It's "largely a return to normal I would say, just this year, just this summer," he said.

"The government PPP [Payment Protection Program] loans assisted us, but also the community," Davies said. "They were interested, there was a lot of talk about supporting local businesses here in PT. We benefited from that. People definitely went out of their way to support us and we did our best to serve them," he said.

"We love the waterfront, we love the Port, we love being a part of the working waterfront community, and we just think it's a real dynamic engine above and beyond Key City," Davies said.



William Barbee cuts up a Pacific cod, filleting and prepping the meat for market. left: Casey Greenspane, Taryn Williams, and owner Johnpaul Davies of Key City Fish Company pose with a salmon at the front counter.

“I really love the different environment of people here. It’s really fun with the group of people I normally work with,” said Taryn Williams, a recent hire at Key City.

Similar to any member new to the Key City Fish Co. team, Williams is going through the process of learning to cut and prepare various meats, from salmon to rockfish.

“I grew up on a cow farm, so I grew up processing meat, and once I got here I didn’t know how to fillet fish, nothing,” Williams said. “Today is my first day trying on true cod. It’s pretty fun.”

For employee Casey Greenspane, who’s worked at Key City for 22 years, the key to proficiently preparing meats was learning from multiple butchers.

“I had five different lessons on salmon at different times when I was first starting, by choice, because even though the main lesson was the same, I learned something a little bit different by having all five of them show me their techniques, one of which was a lefty,” he said.

Greenspane’s favorite part of the job is playing with knives gratuitously, he said, joking.

“One of the biggest struggles, not just for our customers but for ourselves as well, is labor,” Davies said. “We really struggled to have a full team in place. We have fantastic team members, but we really had to work our butts off to keep up, and we’re just now starting to get to that level where we’re fully staffed and not racing every day to get the job done,” he added.

Davies has raised wages by around 20 percent since the pandemic, but it’s almost impossible to keep up with housing costs, he said. “That is a big challenge for society at large and Port Townsend in particular, as well,” he said.

Key City supplies numerous businesses from East Jefferson County to restaurants in Bellingham to the Kalaloch Lodge near Queets.

“Most days we’re running four trucks in different directions,” Davies said. “Seafood is still our front and center. Halibut is probably the number one most popular fish that people purchase, followed by salmon.”





Caulking Irons from C. Drew & Co. Established in 1837, the factory burned down in 1970 after being sold to Kingston Tool Company. The tools made by Drew are often sought after and cherished by the shipwrights who own them. The irons are used to wedge cotton and oakum between the planks of a wooden boat. Irons came in different shapes and sizes for the tricky, uneven, and hard to reach shapes of a boat. Some sharper for driving cotton into tight seams, and some thicker for the oakum in wider seams.

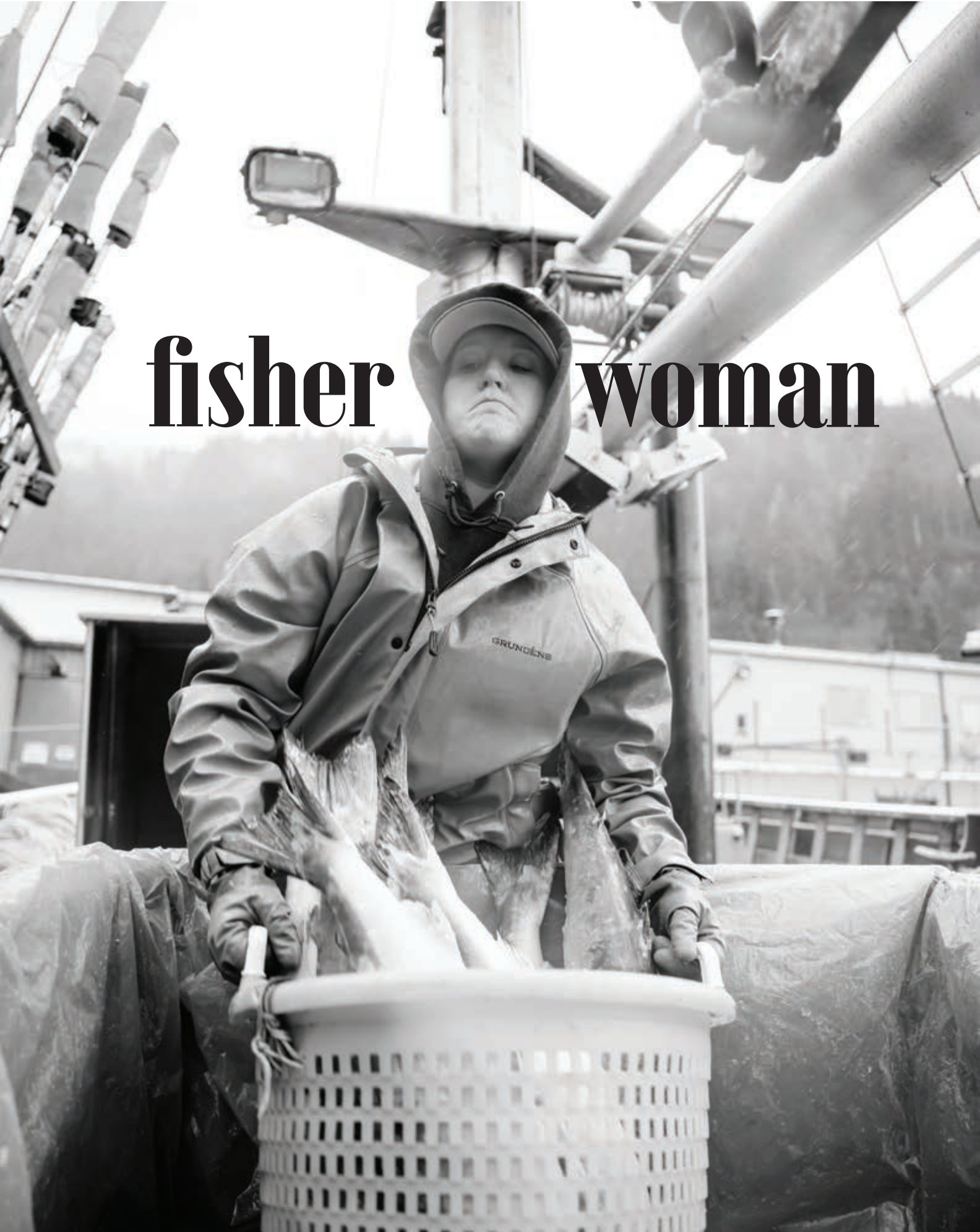
Caulking Irons

photography and captions
by Jeremy Johnson



left: A Drew caulking mallet, used to hit the flat end an iron. Some mallets are marked with a triple-“O”, or “triple ought” indicating they were made with the more durable cast steel instead of iron. Traditionally, the handles were made from black mesquite. Caulking is the bread and butter of being a shipwright, a skill frequently employed maintaining wooden boats. Every mallet and iron set has a slightly different pitch, often adjusted by the shipwright, and it’s not uncommon to know who’s caulking based solely on the pitch and rhythmic “ting” emanating from the yard.

fisher woman



photography and story
by Jeremy Johnson

A graduate of The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, Katie Linder was looking for something different after becoming disenchanted with grad school. She took a job as an observer, recording the catch on commercial fishing boats and quickly realized she'd rather be fishing. "I kind of just wanted to fish. That seemed fun to me. I didn't want to do other science-y stuff. With fishing you just work hard and you get rewarded. That appealed to me more than the job I was doing."

It's rare for women to work in commercial fishing, and even more so in longlining. Katie considers herself a fisherwoman and encourages other women to try it out if they're interested: "I would say to a woman going fishing [that] you'll probably meet some of the best people out there. Every woman-fisherman that I've met so far has just been so awesome. In every way they're humble and they're usually pretty nice. And then also just super badass."

left: Ketchikan, Alaska - April 15, 2023: Katie Linder lifts a basket of frozen salmon to take to the bait freezer located aft of the pilot house on the FV Polaris. The bait will be used for halibut fishing in the Bering Sea.







above: Bellingham, Washington - April 12, 2023: Katie Linder picks up a 60-pound bag of frozen squid during a stopover in Bellingham to pick up bait for the 2023 black cod and halibut fishing seasons.

left: Ketchikan, Alaska - April 15, 2023: Katie Linder, deckhand on F/V Polaris, poses for a portrait. In addition to learning the duties of a deckhand, she also chose to be the cook because she "like[s] vegetables" and didn't want to eat Hot Pockets for two weeks.

Trading facials

photography and story by Anna Tallarico

Within six months of graduating college, Analicia “Ana” Pedersen found herself on a commercial fishing boat, headed to Alaska. “I still look back at myself, and say ‘Ana, what? Who are you?’” Pedersen said, laughing during a recent chat.

It wasn’t entirely out of the blue.

When she was four, her family lived in Sitka, Alaska. Rummaging through old photos of her little self proudly displaying fish she’d caught, Pedersen realized she’d always felt drawn to the water. “Sitka, Seattle, New York, Port Townsend... something about the smell of the harbor tells me I’m home,” she said.

Compelled by the bond she witnessed between a group of fishermen returning from their summer fishing season, marching by in their XTRATUF boots and excitedly planning their winter adventures with all the money they’d just brought in, Pedersen rushed to the Port of Seattle and walked along the docks at Fishermen’s Terminal to ask boats if they needed crew. “I’d barely spent time on boats in my life!” Pedersen said. “I got seasick and had no skills to bring to the table.”

Before finding herself on the docks, begging to get aboard, Pedersen grew up in Seattle and went to Evergreen College to study public health. She dreamed of working in that field on an international scale, but that dream slipped further and further away from her as she struggled to truly find what she was passionate about. “I began to show an interest in the psychology around health,” she explained, “so I started to ask questions: ‘What is our personal relationship to health? ‘What kind of autonomy do we really have?’” Inspired by the days when communities would rely on local medicine women, she discovered the hidden art of herbalism and skincare when she moved to New York City after college. She worked with an herbalist esthetician, who took her under her wing and taught Pedersen the craft. It opened the gateway to a whole new philosophy underpinning the surface of mainstream healthcare.

“I realized I was good at meeting people where they are, how to creatively adapt to everyone’s individual needs,” Pedersen said. She became a proponent of health—both physical and emotional—via skin. “Skin is the face that we put forward into the world,” she said. “It tells a full story.”

Watching people—especially young women—come in and go out of the door transformed, ready and willing to make changes for the betterment of their health and lives brought—and still brings—Pedersen joy.

“Wanting to feel beautiful [in oneself] isn’t about vanity. It comes from a deeper feminist issue,” Pedersen explained, recalling how she struggled with acne throughout her teenage years and the toll it took on her mental health. “I started wearing makeup, which didn’t really help matters. The narrative out there is that you’ll never be good enough for the mainstream. It’s an impossible standard, and yet, women everywhere feel the pressure to meet it,” she said.

“You must fall in love with your own personal evolution,” Pedersen said. “Ultimately, you are not in control.”

And this is exactly what Pedersen embodied in 2016 when she plunged into the world of commercial fishing.

The harmful, ever-present narrative that plagued her struggles with skincare and self-acceptance followed her to the wilderness of Alaska. “Being the only woman was isolating,” she said. “Navigating the dynamic between myself and the rest of the crew was nearly impossible. I couldn’t make any friends at first, because they abused my trust again and again and again.” It made her want to scream, to leave the boat—but stranded in what she described as “the most intimate setting in the world,” she had no choice but to stick it out. “It really shows you what you’re made of,” she said.

Though navigating the interpersonal struggles was a challenge, the experience as a whole was a personal breakthrough.

for fishing



Point Hudson, June 7, 2023: Analia Pedersen reminisces about her three seasons of commercial fishing in Alaska. Photo by Anna Tallarico.

“Only a select handful of people get to experience the wild like this,” Pedersen said. “You’re hit in the face with brevity.”

With the chaos and complexities of daily life stripped away, clarity and a solid relationship to self was formed.

“Everything became so simple,” she said. “I had one job—to provide. I had to nourish my team as the cook, I had to work hard on deck and keep up a good attitude.” She fell into a natural rhythm during three months in Alaska. “I earned every penny,” she said. “It was so gratifying. There’s nothing like being covered in fish guts, knowing you gave it your all.”

Pedersen has fished commercially for three seasons so far. “I’m going to go with my flow,” she said. “It’s a lot to give three months of my life over. But I get this ache around this time of year, the calling to pack my bags and get on the water,” she admitted. It’s a bittersweet choice to stay behind, but until the stars align to set sail once again, Pedersen remains busy building her esthetician career on land.

She currently works with clients one-on-one at Glow in Port Townsend, carries a line of her own skincare products, and is in partnership with a colleague to develop sustainable, easy detox practices specifically for women with breast cancer. “Self-care is at the intersection of our nervous system, psychological system, and soul,” Pedersen said. “There’s power in the exchange.” She challenges readers to let go of control and find healing, whether something as small as prioritizing skincare or as daring as hopping a fishing boat to Alaska. “Give it up to your greater self. Create that change,” she said.

“I am a body, and I am a story. What story do I want to tell?” she mused.

Shipyards plan for

photography by Lloyd Mullen
story by Kirk Boxleitner

Port Townsend's Boat Haven businesses see their customer traffic driven by the seasons, but they've developed some methods of keeping their overall consumption and labor on a relatively even keel all year round.

Robert Frank, president of Admiral Ship Supply, has been a veteran of the boatyard's economic tides since 2015, and he emphasized how much this tourist-supported community depends upon the commercial fishing industry.

"Fishing is a billion-dollar industry, to the point that even its trickle-down benefits account for a lot of economic activity," Frank said. "A single fishing boat amounts to half a million dollars in business by itself, even before hotel rooms and local meals for crew members are factored in."

Frank generally considers late February through late June to be his peak period for business, since the departures of different types of fishing vessels tend to be staggered throughout the spring and start of summer, but this schedule can still yield 50-hour work-weeks for his shop.

Frank estimated that March, April, May and June sales average 33% more than the rest of the year, and for the past two years, Admiral Ship Supply has done between 40-43% of its business for the year within those same four months. "This is despite sales being down due to the paralysis of a full boatyard," said Frank, who blamed a special pricing discount, enacted in the fall of 2019 to fill the boatyard, with having the undesired effect of taking up spaces during the boatyard's busy season. "It increased the number of stored boats over the number of actively worked-on boats."

According to Frank, dozens of commercial fishing vessels contacted him, during the 2021 and 2022 seasons, to tell him they would be unable to schedule haul-outs before they were due on their fishing grounds.

However, that discount was repealed last year, and Frank not only reported this year's sales are up, but also anticipated this season would likely account for 44-46% of Admiral Ship Supply's sales for the year.

In spite of such seasonal patterns, which have held steady enough for Frank to take some time off between October and January, he places a priority on retaining the employees he has — three full-time, two part-time, working "family-wage jobs, earning higher than retail by far, because we pay more than Seattle," to avoid staffing turnover — by shouldering as much extra labor as he can by himself.

"I figure 'work' boats are about half my business, and that includes charter vessels, whale watching, fishing boats and tugs, but they're probably only 10% of my accounts," Frank said. "They drive our business by spending much more money than the rest, and fishing boats amount to three-quarters of that business."

Frank explained that a number of fishing and charter vessels haul in March and April, as they need to be in Alaska by June, while recreational boats, unless they're out for major overhauls, don't start hauling out until mid-June to July.

"Recreational boats are much larger in numbers, but don't spend as much per customer," Frank said. "They tend to be price-sensitive and not loyal, making purchases during June, July and August. Some do haul out earlier, but most people wait until better weather, and for when they have time for maintenance during summer breaks."

When it comes to which parts tend to experience the worst "runs" on their supplies, Frank identified boat bottom paint and sacrificial zinc anodes as "huge" during the commercial season.

"Starting about now, we tend to sell more topside paint and varnish," Frank said. "Supply chain issues have been difficult all throughout the pandemic, and manufactured goods and chemicals have been the worst. Things are 90% back to normal, but almost every day, I find that something is still unavailable. Certain types of paint simply can't be purchased."

Frank further noted the "crazy" degree of inflation, "especially in chemicals," that led most of last year's paints, resins and solvents to increase in price between 20-50 percent.

the economic tides

Arren Day is part of the Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op, which neighbors Frank's Admiral Ship Supply in the boatyard, and Day pointed out that the co-op was spared the impacts of the 2019-22 discount. "We have our own property, so we weren't affected by that policy," he said.

Day expressed his sympathies, since he agreed that the discount seemed like the proverbial "good idea at the time," but he agreed with Frank that its intended incentivization of business in the boatyard seemed to have backfired.

According to Day, who's worked at the boatyard since 2014, the co-op has diversified its work calendar to the point that it no longer has a "slow season," so that none of its 62 Full-Time Equivalent staff members (which do include some part-time staffers) need to be laid off.

"We do shut down for a few weeks in August, but that's just to conduct maintenance on our stairs and other infrastructure," Day said. "Since about 2016, we've been working year-round, which actually makes it easier to schedule our work."

An example Day cited is the co-op's work on wooden ships, which it tends to schedule for the fall and winter months, since its fully enclosed facilities allow it to work on those vessels without them being affected by the elements.

"Because we keep those wooden boats inside, they're not exposed to wind, rain or other bad weather, and they don't get dried out by the heat or light of the summer sun," Day said. "Yes, we tend to have a 'crunch time' from January to June, due to the commercial fishing fleet, but our business is roughly 50/50 between commercial craft and yachts, so we schedule our yacht work when we're not busy with commercial fishing boats."

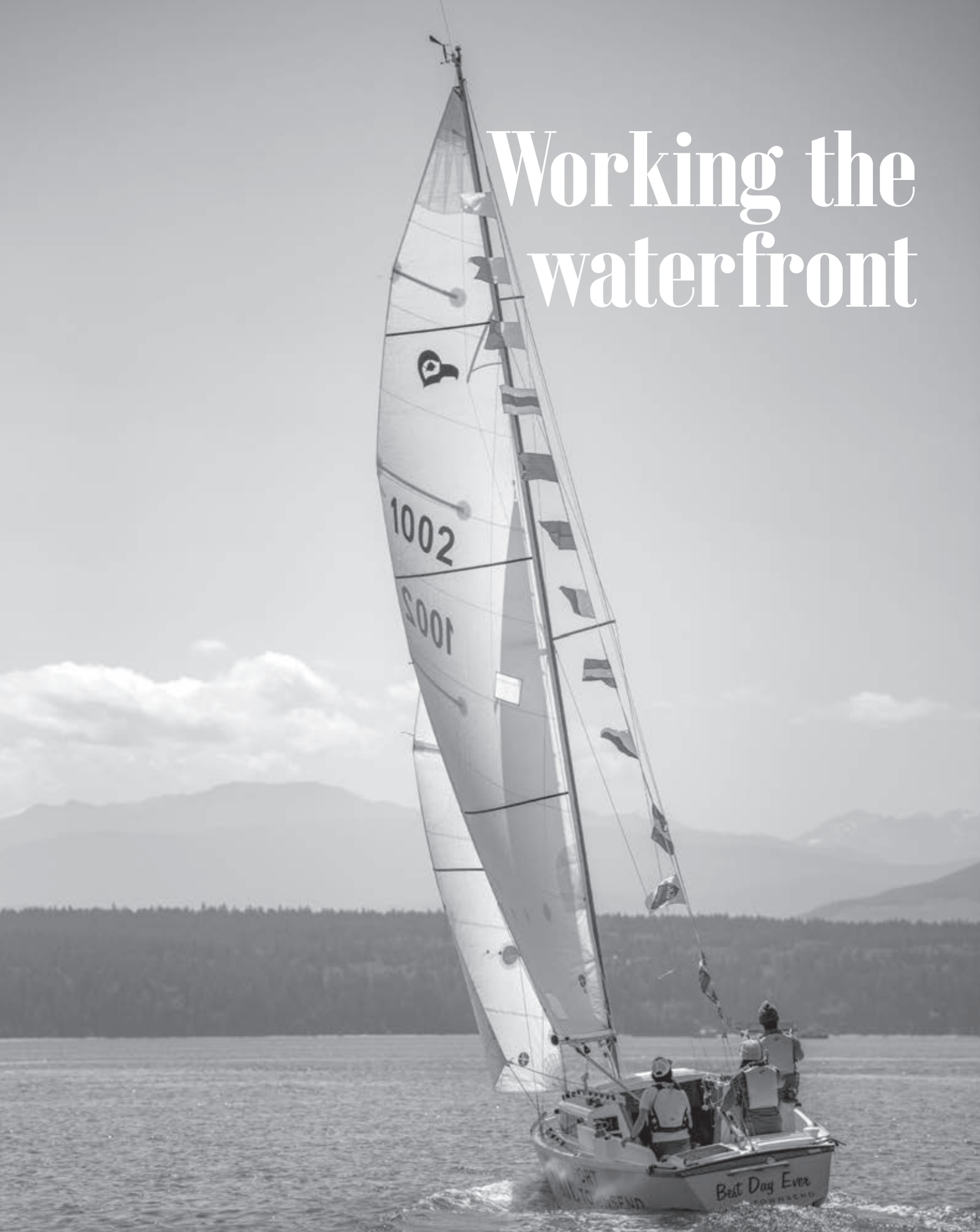
Day agreed with Frank that the supply chain, while it's recently improved, has made zinc anodes and both bottom and topside paint scarce at times, while he's currently looking at delays of up to a year to obtain boat engines by John Deere and Cummins, since they're manufactured in countries such as China and Pakistan.

But when it comes to attracting any sort of labor to the boatyard, seasonal or otherwise, Day's biggest concern is ensuring that younger workers who are starting out in the maritime trades are furnished with affordable housing.

As much as Day expressed his "eternal gratitude" to both the Port of Port Townsend District and Jefferson County for "the support they've shown us," he also expressed concern. "We could be looking at the extinction of the 'shed boys,' because Airbnb has priced them out of housing," he said. "We won't get seasonal laborers if they can't afford to live here, so if you're thinking of starting an Airbnb, I'd ask you to rent a room to a local boat school student instead."

Robert Frank stands in front of a tugboat near his shop at the boat yard in Port Townsend, WA.

Working the waterfront



story by Kirk Boxleitner

For those looking to charter a local sailing excursion, Left Coast Charters and Sail Port Townsend offer two distinctly different approaches to a day around Port Townsend Bay (and beyond), while still sharing some key beliefs about what the sailing experience should entail.

Erik Brown co-owns Left Coast Charters, based on Point Hudson, with his wife, Alyce Flanagan, and their fleet consists of a single gaff-rigged catboat, the “Katie M,” as their charter sailing business enters its third season.

Amber Heasley, the founder and one of three captains of Sail Port Townsend, is based out of the Port Townsend Boat Haven marina, with a fleet of two Thunderbird-class sailboats (hers is named “Best Day Ever”), as her charter sailing business enters its fourth season this year.

Both Brown and Flanagan’s backgrounds were rich with sailing experience long before they started Left Coast Charters together. Brown attended the Sound School Regional Vocational Aquaculture Center, Connecticut-based maritime trade high school, and was getting paid to teach sailing even before he graduated, while Flanagan was raised on board Port Townsend’s Schooner “Alcyone,” and her parents operated their own charter sailing business in town.

Heasley’s jobs at the Port Townsend Marine Science Center and the Northwest Maritime Center led her to teach (and fall in love with) sailing, and trips to the Caribbean introduced her to charter sailing. A combination of COVID shutting down normal operations and Heasley realizing Port Townsend had no charter sailing businesses at the time led her to start Sail Port Townsend.

Brown and Heasley both enjoy sharing their passion for sailing with those who come to them with less experience in the field. Brown appreciates being able to sail on “a cool old wooden boat,” and the catboat is his favorite model “It does its job so well,” he said. Heasley prefers the Thunderbird because it’s sportier. “They sail really well,” she said. Although “you can just sit back and relax,” she said she enjoys “getting everyone on board involved,” albeit to whatever degrees her passengers might be comfortable with.

Aside from his wife’s roots in the community, Brown considers Port Townsend one of the best places to have a wooden boat in the entire world, due to its concentration of skills, supplies and passion, among those who share sailing as a common interest. And in the years since Heasley started Sail Port Townsend, she’s been heartened to see peers like Left Coast Charters further expand the local charter sailing industry, so each charter can develop their own identity.



left: Photo by Jason Hummel. top: Point Hudson Marina, June 14, 2023 - Erik Brown and his wife Alyce Flanagan of Left Coast Charters pose for a portrait on their boat. Photo by Anna Tallarico.

“A lot of people who come out with us might have had some scary sailing experiences before,” Brown said. “We just want them to have a good time in a mellow atmosphere. People can be part of the sailing operations, if they so choose, but what we offer are the sort of relaxing, classy day sails where you can also hold a picnic, sitting around the cockpit’s table without your knees touching, and pouring your wine without spilling it. We cater to keeping our groups comfortable.”

By contrast, Heasley emphasized, “I wanted to create an easy, safe, and fun way to make sailing more accessible to regular people” Heasley said. “We try to bust some myths about sailing culture. We think sailing is for everyone. We also operate a sailing school.

“I like being engaged by the mindful activity of it all,” Heasley said. “When you’re out on the water, sailing a vessel like this, responding to shifts in your conditions requires you to be incredibly present, in your body and in the environment.”

However much each skipper’s ethos differs from the other, Brown and Heasley are equally committed to ensuring they treat their customers to fair-weather cruises exclusively.

“We would never take people out into terrible weather,” Brown said. “We want them to have good experiences on the water. I see it as my mission to be an ambassador for the best that sailing has to offer.”

“Ever since I started I’ve always wanted to teach others to learn how to love sailing as much as I do,” Heasley said. “The name of my boat is ‘Best Day Ever,’ and that’s what I want to deliver.”

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*In the Summer of 2006 from left, J. Louis Mullen, Daryl Wells, Thomas, Lloyd, and Jesse Mullen sail across the Columbia bar in fine weather.
Photo by Captain John.*

the Pacific

by Thomas Mullen

It was midnight on the Columbia Bar and if there was a moon, you wouldn't know it.

The seas were rolling at 10 to 12 feet and the waves were only about four feet but it was high tide, which meant this was as safe as the Bar gets.

The wind pelted the rain like thumbtacks into my face, which didn't seem to bother the skipper who had the helm.

"Jump the main!" he shouted. So I lashed myself to a lifeline and crawled out toward mast, one hand for myself and one for the boat.

China Girl was a low slung 36-footer, and she was rolling hard so by the time I got to the mast, I found myself holding onto the boom, wondering my next move.

I looked back to the skipper but I could barely make him out in the fog.

There was no way I was getting the sail up that mast so I crawled back to the cockpit, and soaked like a seal, waited for the skipper to say something.

"You know, your first time across the bar, you ought to be able to at least see it," he said, and we came about.

When there's trouble aboard a boat, or most any vessel, it's not just because one thing has gone wrong but more likely a succession of mistakes.

It was day four of a five day off-shore sailing school which started as an overnight journey down the Columbia River.

During that 12-hour run we sliced through some poor fisherman's net and had there not been six of us men aboard to his one, that event would have ended badly for our skipper.

It was a bad omen and for the next three days we listened to the weather as squall upon squall tore across the Bar.

Combined seas of 20 feet kept us tied up in Astoria. Sometimes we'd venture up the river, to practice drills and to learn how to reef in heavy wind.

It was great fun and we were learning but crossing the Bar, home to thousands of shipwrecks, was to be the highlight of the week.

The skipper, who ran the course, began to worry that we were becoming "frozen."

"You can sit here and listen to that radio, waiting for the right conditions or you can untie," he said.

So we left Astoria, at about 10:30 that night, without much visibility.

But the skipper was an expert navigator and he delighted in training us to find our way in the dark. In the storm.

By the time we reached the mouth of the river, I couldn't see past the bow. My teenage boys were off watch, safe down below but I'm certain they weren't resting. My wife and her father, wiser than we, were sound asleep at the hotel. "What the Hell am I doing here?"

The answer came: You're out of time. You've paid for a week-long lesson of offshore sailing and that week is up - if you're gonna cross the bar, now is the time.

But that thinking was wrong-headed. Better to arrive alive than not arrive at all. Besides, we weren't going anywhere, not really, just testing the mettle.

The next day the sea fell flat and we sailed across the Bar in 12-15 knot winds, with sweeping views of the Pacific and the Cape Disappointment lighthouse, for which we no longer had need.



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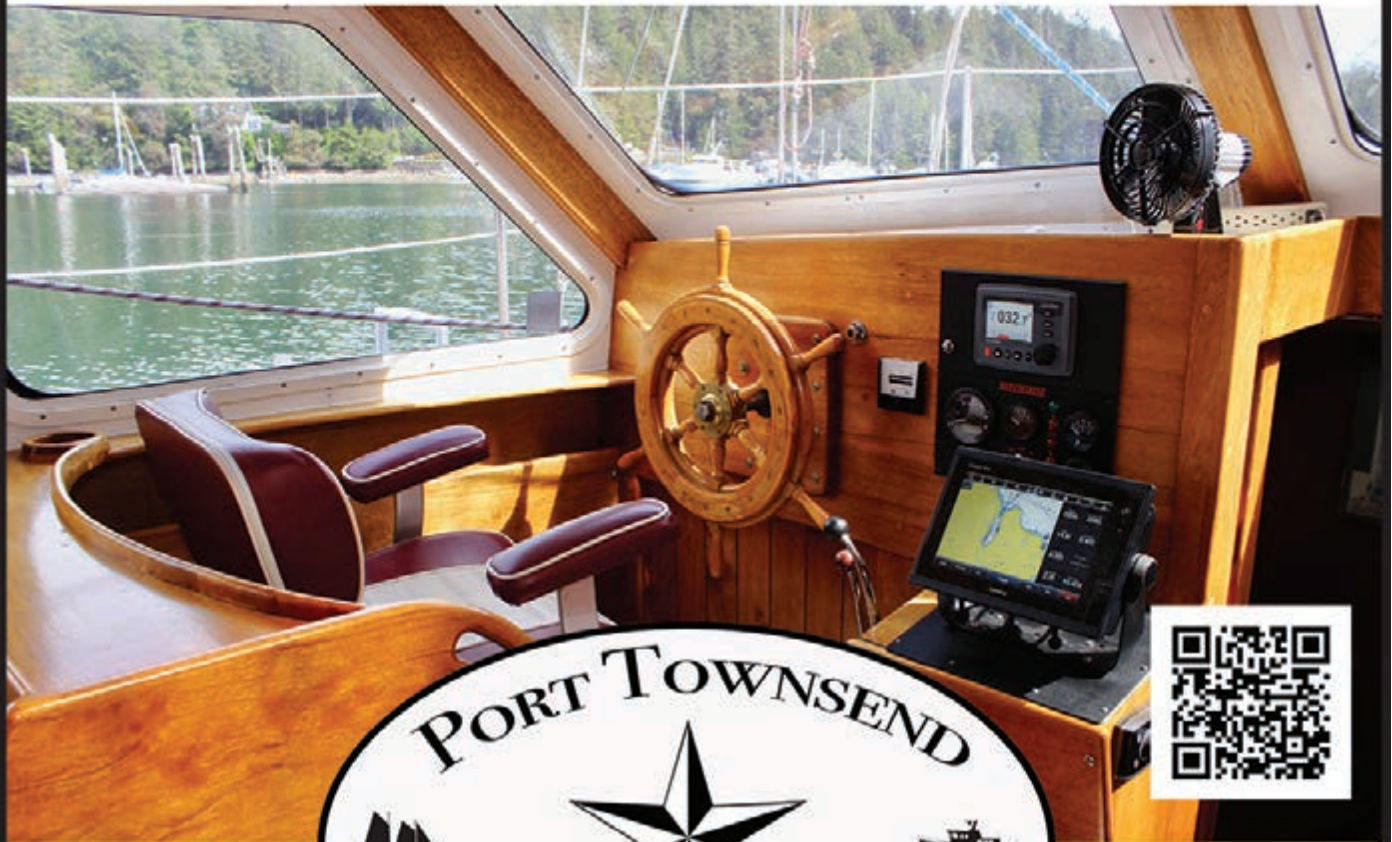


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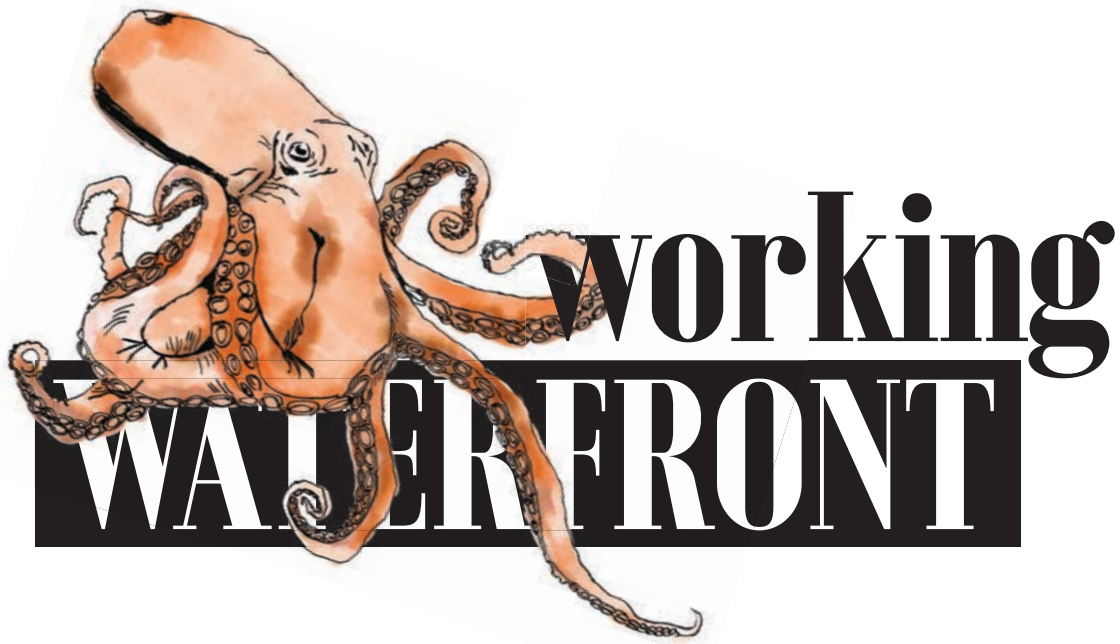


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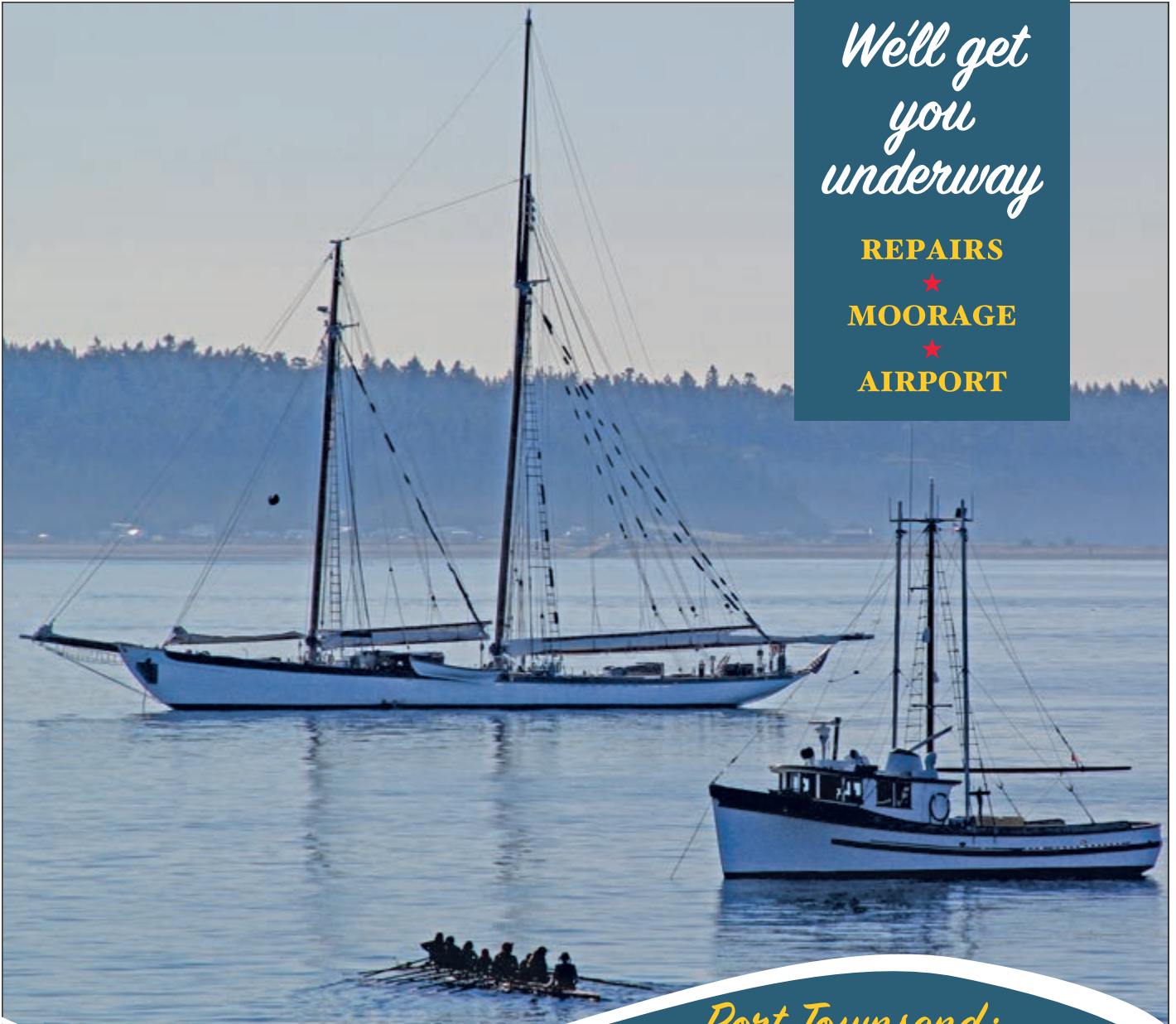
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