

Nordhavn Pendana GUEST INTERVIEW – Mr. Jeff Merrill

Jeff Merrill



Pam and Jeff Merrill aboard a Nordhavn 60

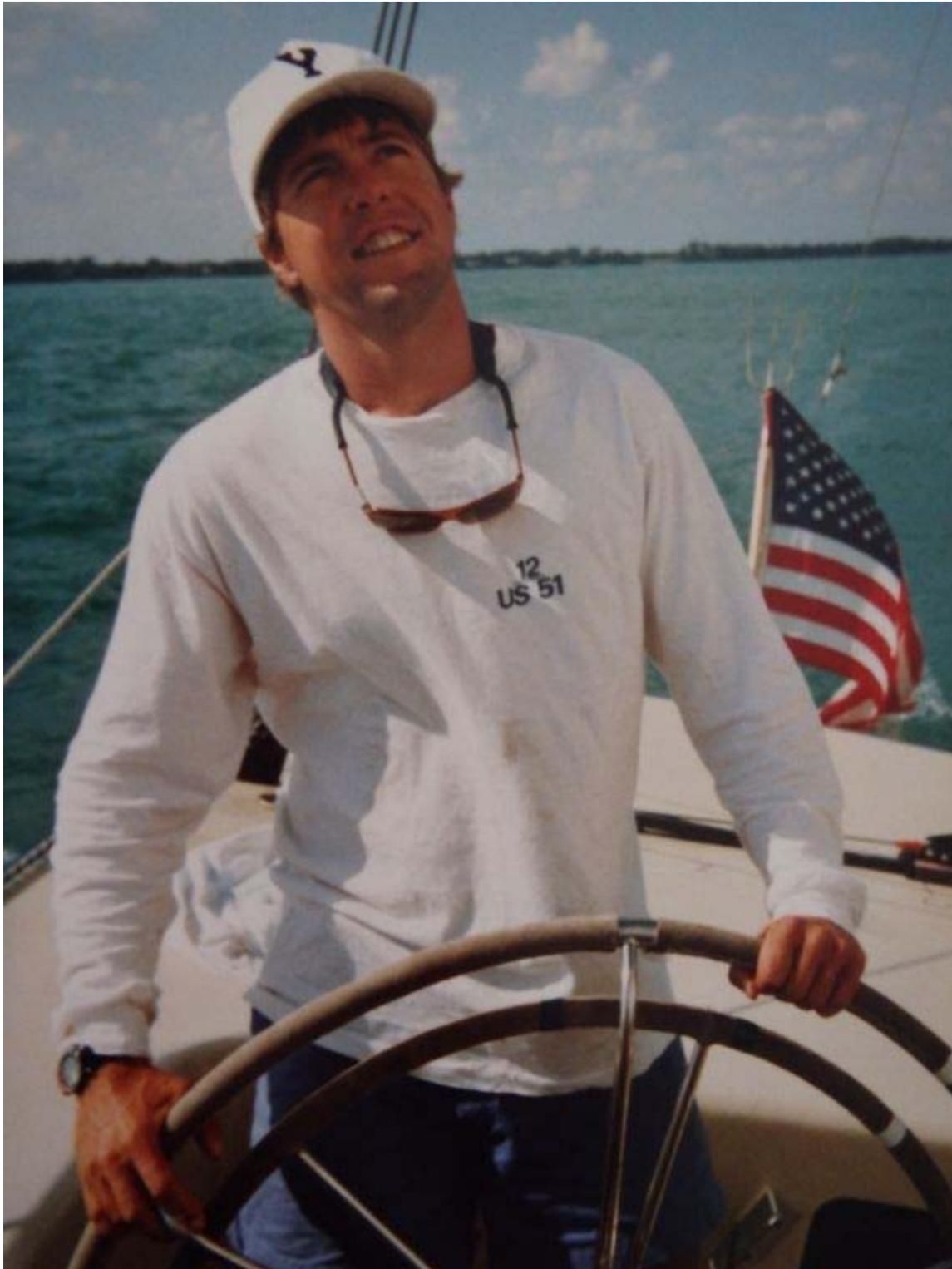
So, Jeff, tell us a little something about your career to date?

You could say I have salt water in my veins. My life has revolved around the water. As per one of former Nordhavn 62 owner Jimmy Buffett's songs, I'm a son of a son of a sailor and my kids also sail. I grew up racing Naples sabots (leeboard on the starboard side) and played water polo and swam on the swim team in high school. Just about every weekend as a kid was spent racing sailboats – I'm very competitive and love all of the mental aspects of yacht racing. I've also done a lot of windsurfing and think that kite boarding looks like a blast.



Winning the Southern California youth co-ed championships with Mandi Smith back in the 70's when boy's hair was longer than girls!

I met my wife Pam, racing sailboats and she epitomizes that saying that behind every good man is a great woman. I took up SCUBA diving in my teens and continued to sail competitively in college. After graduating from Stanford University with an Economics degree I knew that I wanted to find some kind of work involving boating. My first job was with a company developing a new Hobie catamaran rudder. I went on to sell sailboat masts then worked for the boat builder, W.D. Schock as sales manager (builder of the Lido 14 that I still race today). I took three years off from 1984 – 1987 to campaign for the America's Cup – starting with the Courageous Challenge and finishing with the Heart of America team. That was an amazing world tour with some exceptional sailors and incredible travel.



Skippering the 12 meter, Heart of America. Love the pitchfork atop the ensign!

Returning home I started my own company Play-With-Your-Mind, Inc. and began marketing a game I invented called Mindblocks (I love playing board games). Great business experience, but not an industry where I could to make a living so I jumped into the fire (so to speak) when I was hired as sales manager of Magma Products – makers of the ubiquitous stainless steel marine kettle BBQ's. After three years selling boat barbecues and accessories I was hired by Don Kohlmann to be the sales and marketing vice president of cruising sailboat builder, Pacific Seacraft. I loved helping the buyers tour their boats being built and working the boat shows across the country. I left after seven years to get a “real job” as a real estate loan officer working for my brother, Scott. Then I got a call from Jim Leishman which led to an incredible run at PAE selling new and used Nordhavns before starting my own yacht brokerage in January of 2014.



On the shop floor at Pacific Seacraft building sailboats (always with camera!)

I understand you were with PAE (Nordhavn) for a long time. How long exactly?

I was hired in October of 1999 and stayed until January of 2014 – so just over 14 years.

What was your fondest memory of working there?

Too many great days with wonderful boat owners who wanted to pursue their ambitions of heading out for adventure with their families. Spending years with a client to plan and consider where they wanted to travel is part of the fun and then training with them on the finished product and seeing them come into their own is very gratifying. I probably miss talking with Dan Streech the most, he's amazing. He has an open-door and I would usually barge in once or twice a day to his annoyance and amusement. Jeff Leishman is brilliant and so understated. Jim is a marketing genius; he will go down in boating history as one of our brightest visionaries. Most of all I loved being out at sea with clients showing them the ropes. My biggest success story is probably with Eric and Christi Grab on the N43 Kosmos, they were too ambitious to realize what they were getting into, but pulled it off magnificently and I joined them coming through the Panama Canal when they returned to the Pacific to wrap up their circumnavigation. Planning a new boat build is a time consuming labor of love that I truly miss, especially when the boat is finally completed, commissioned and we get to go out for training rides. I really enjoyed going to the yards in Taiwan and China to see the boats being built as well as going to boat shows and meeting with clients, a lot of travel by air. Two legendary trips, the Nordhavn 40 ATW (Around the World) and GSSR (Great Siberian Sushi Run) remain very strong memories of great times offshore.



Going through the Panama Canal on the Nordhavn 40 ATW adventure

Why did you choose to work for Nordhavn?

Nordhavn chose me! Jim Leishman called me after he heard I had left Pacific Seacraft and asked me to come work with PAE. I really knew very little about the brand, but felt comfortable with Jim, Joe Meglen and Dan Streech (the partners of Lemest Yacht Sales) and knew I had a strong boat building background, and these were long distance cruisers like the Pacific Seacraft sailboats...how different could it be? My brief research of the company known for taking power boats to the places only sailboats ventured got me quickly intrigued. The timing was perfect. I was at a point in my life where I had decided to “grow up”, got my real estate license and was training to be a mortgage loan officer... but the opportunity to be the sales and project manager for the Nordhavn 35 and to work closely with the team at the Ta Shing yard in Taiwan was too cool to pass up. Jim can be very persuasive and the PSC/PAE connection – PSC built the Nordhavn 40 - has led to several key PSC “alumni” switching from sail to power – Ray Danet, Neil Russell and Don Kohlmann – each of whom went on to start a sales office for Nordhavn). Jim invited me to fly to the Ta Shing yard in October of 1999 and asked me to become the Nordhavn 35 project manager, a proposal I just couldn't turn down.



Showing daughter Elle and son Jonn all about the Nordhavn 35

So tell us a little about the new business you have established?

Starting a yacht brokerage is not something I set out to do, but now that I've figured it out I'm having a ball. It was a career move and all about a commitment to my profession and my clients. In today's market I am a strong believer in the importance of the internet for research and promotion. My main effort in the first year was to develop the content for my website and try to come up with something that would be educational and helpful for trawler buyers AND sellers. My clients have remained very loyal and in short order I had my first listings and made my first sales. It took me six months to get into the black and things have continued to grow each

month. One of the best aspects of being independent is spreading out into other trawler brands. On my own I've now sold boats built by American Tug, Kadey-Krogen and Selene (in addition to several Nordhavns). One really exciting development is that I'm working with Bering Yachts to help them market and sell their steel hull long range passage makers and have been to their yard in China twice in the last few months. I'm also attracting more unique and specialized listings like the 90' cold moulded sailboat, *Lauren L.* and the custom 73' aluminum trawler, *Retired Sailor III.*



Jeff with daughter Elle at the Newport, RI boat show in the 90's

Why did you choose to go out on your own?

I love the Nordhavn brand and the owners who cruise them. I'd reached an age (55) where I was a bit restless, I wanted to do more, but had hit the ceiling at PAE and my career path had found me routed into a cul-de-sac. I had a long heart to heart with one of my clients who said I did a great job for him, and asked why I wasn't working for myself. He (and a few other close friends) asked me to project myself into the future and, when I looked back, asked if I would have any regrets. That was a real eye opener. The challenge of leaving a sure thing and starting over was not entered into lightly, but I knew I could spread my wings and, with a lot of flapping not only get off the ground, but possibly soar. I've been writing a series of "Dialing-In-Your-Trawler" articles for Ocean Navigator magazine and speaking at Trawler Fests and Steve D'Antonio's Trawler Workshops. Starting JMYS has opened up an incredible number of opportunities that just would not have been available had I stayed with PAE.



Presenting a lecture at the Steve D'Antonio Trawler Workshop in April, 2015

What was the primary driver for your choice?

I'm fairly independent and a habitual overachiever who likes to control my own destiny, this drive goes back to my sailboat racing roots. I felt that I could do things better if I could do it my way. I wanted to be completely free to be an advocate for my clients and not worry about having a conflict with my employers. I can now more freely collaborate with long time colleagues like Steve D'Antonio, Bob Senter and other boat builders. I've always put in long hours (I'm an admitted workaholic) but now that time is better justified. my self-motivation has accelerated to a level I never thought possible. I've been involved in the purchase and sale of nearly two hundred cruising sailboats and trawlers and have learned a lot of important details about what works and what doesn't.

Nordhavn management wants their customers to order a "standard" boat to streamline production and stay on schedule, I understand the business side of that logic, but it's not what the customers really want when they pony up for a Nordhavn. Most of my clients want to know all of their available choices and relied on me to make recommendations for upgrades and improvements that would enhance their enjoyment and increase their resale value. These ideas did not make me very popular with the project managers. However, many of my suggestions for product improvements have become popular options on new Nordhavn builds.

In my opinion, spending time using the product and visiting the yards should be a requirement of all boat building employees so that they understand how little things can make a big difference. Eric and Christi Grab circumnavigated on their Nordhavn 43 *Kosmos* and they, along with James and Jennifer Hamilton on the Nordhavn 52 *Dirona* built exceptional boats with all kinds of extras that I could only recommend having spent long lengths of time at sea on Nordhavns.



Jeff and son Jonn in Japan for the GSSR trip to Ta Shing in Taiwan

Jeff, what do you do differently than other yacht brokers?

I'm very focused on helping buyers find the right boat with the best overall value, a boat that will provide the means to accomplish their cruising goals. I spend a lot of time trying to determine what their plans are and budget before going out shopping. I've developed several proprietary documents to help define objectives and to compare similar boats. These forms take a lot of time to fill out, but my clients love the results. I recommend that boaters should buy the smallest boat that is big enough to accomplish their goals. I'm a good listener and write everything down. I

take lots of notes, thousands of photos and am fairly well organized. After closing I love developing check lists and spending time aboard doing training so that they are comfortable with operations and can go out cruising with confidence. In fact, I start the training process shortly after we meet, there is a lot of information to digest and an educated buyer is better prepared to make the best decisions.

For sellers I create a detailed confidential marketing plan and have had great interest with the YouTube videos I've done – over 200,000 views and growing. I feel it is important to be on the boat and write up a very detailed specification sheet and include dozens of photos so that a buyer can get a good feel for that particular boat. I also try to check in regularly with a market report – what other similar boats might have sold, any similar model new listings on the market and what is happening with the competition. Sellers want regular reports so that they know you haven't forgotten them and they like to hear what has happened with showings and leads. Signing a listing agreement and then posting the boat on the internet isn't enough of an effort, you need to continually look for new ways to promote and gain exposure.

As I've found the time to get all of the startup practices ironed out I'm looking to continue writing more articles about my clients and about my business. I wrote dozens of articles for the Nordhavn website and people are always telling me how much they enjoy reading them.

When I make a promise I keep it and I've learned not to promise something that I don't control. Buyers and sellers like to know up front what you are going to do to make their experience fun and productive. I have a pretty good track record of exceeding their expectations and the time spent with my clients invariably leads to lifelong friendships.

Jeff, what are the three key areas you think a broker operation like your needs to succeed?

Product knowledge from hands on experience. Buyers are looking for a salesperson who can help them make a very important (and expensive) decision and really need sound advice about the difference of the boats they are considering. A salesperson speaking with knowledge gained from thousands of sea miles who has “been there and done that” is essential.

Accountability – follow up and availability. Clients want to know that you are there for them 24/7. I answer my phone at all hours and am always online checking and responding to emails. Clients want immediate access and fast answers, something that I enjoy providing. Good communication skills can't be underestimated. I think I talk to John Torelli an average of five

times a week, he's in between boats now, but we have worked together on three different Nordhavns. Repeat business and referrals are a huge bonus for doing my job right.

Building relationships. The trust that a buyer or seller places in the broker of their choice needs to be earned over a period of time. Having a trawler and going out cruising is an incredible life experience that is even more fun when there is a personal relationship of mutual respect and friendship. I've been very fortunate to be invited to go cruising with several clients now friends - that, to me, is the ultimate compliment.

All three of the above essential attributes combine to help create and maintain a desirable reputation.

In your past life, pre boating, what did you do?

I grew up boating so I have never known anything else. I was always on the water and have done a lot of sailboat racing and cruising. I tried golf as a kid, but got bored. I love snorkeling and SCUBA diving, in fact I proposed to Pam underwater on the first of April in 1990, yes, April Fool's Day!



Pam and Jeff SCUBA diving on our honeymoon off the Great Barrier Reef in Australia

Jeff, if there was one thing that irritates you about the sales process what would it be?

I think the customer should have more say in the sales process both in selecting the boat and choosing who to work with. A person or couple who are going to spend a couple hundred thousand dollars or more should be treated like royalty and should not only pick which boat is most suitable, but which broker they want to work with to pursue their goals. The attention they deserve should apply not only during the purchase and build process, but also after the closing and should include personal onboard training of all the equipment, whether it is a new or used boat. I think it is a crime that more brokers don't spend time with their clients after the sale to

explain how things work and what to look for in order to and make sure that their clients are completely comfortable with every aspect of operations.

The “data base” that sales companies use to manage contacts by first connection and territory can create a sense of ownership and entitlement for the sales people that does not promote a healthy relationship amongst the sales staff and leaves the unsuspecting customer “locked in” with whoever answers the phone or is handed the lead, I think this is detrimental to fostering the best possible relationship.

I’m astounded that many companies use outdated forms for listings, co-ops and purchase agreements. I’ve refined my forms based on important lessons learned from the three yacht broker associations I belong to. Details like disclosure (has the boat ever been struck by lightning or flooded?), confirming acceptance of dual agency if you are representing buyer and seller and clearly defining what is included in the sale by making the listing write up an addendum to the agreement make everyone’s understanding much more precise. Each of the associations I belong to have a code of ethics and changes in the industry are regularly communicated so it’s easier to stay informed – this protects buyers, sellers and brokers.



Floating around Alamitos Bay in a raft with our golden retriever, Lindley.

What else should someone know about boat buying?

Work with someone you trust and learn what their qualifications and what services before during and after the sale that they are going to provide before you make a commitment. A lot of things are changing in the digital world (electronic signatures on contracts for example) and buyers and sellers need to be certain that they are being represented by a professional who is tuned in to what is happening and is using the latest forms and current with the continual changes in the boating business.

Not every yacht “broker” is actually a yacht broker, most are yacht salespersons and there is a difference. Everyone in boat sales calls themselves a “broker”, but in reality most are not. There are three ways you can become a yacht broker in the U.S. In California you have to take a test to become a salesperson and then after a year you can take a second test to become a licensed broker. In FL you have to pay money and have a background check to get your sales license, then after two years you can upgrade to a broker’s license. You can also take a very demanding exam to become a Certified Professional Yacht Broker (the yacht broker equivalent to a CPA) – once you pass you have to complete continuing education requirements every three years to remain current. If you are going to make your living as a true yacht broker professional, then I think you should get the credentials. I’m passionate about my career and not only want to be the best I can be personally, but also be the best I can be for my clients so I’ve completed the triple play: CA yacht broker, FL yacht broker and CPYB. I also believe in giving back and supporting my regional yacht broker association. I have become very active, first as membership chair and I now serve as the president of the California Yacht Brokers Association.

Would you describe yourself as more of a hunter or more of a gatherer?

I’m a hunter underwater. I love to hunt when I’ve got a mask on – as a kid prying abalone and spear fishing, as I grew older I was a shell collector. Above water I’m a gatherer, a collector, well...actually an accumulator! I own several hundred Reyn Spooner aloha shirts which I wear every day. I have the complete set of PassageMaker magazines and hundreds of boating books. I’m a frustrated musician (never learned an instrument) and I love listening to music – collecting thousands of vinyl records and CD recordings. My favorite thing to gather or collect is advertising characters – you know, Charlie the Tuna, the Jolly Green Giant, Mr. Peanut, etc., I have a room in my house with thousands of smiling icons on the shelves.



Escaping to my special room filled with hundreds of advertising characters

If you had a Nordhavn of your own what would you name her?

I love word play and have thought about names a lot. One of my earlier clients worked for Pfizer Pharmaceuticals and he was the brand manager for Viagra. He bought a Pacific Seacraft 40 and asked what he should name her, without thinking I blurted out “Hard on the wind”, turns out that was second choice and he named her “Spirit of Joy” (he’s a lot more subtle than me). I think I might name my Nordhavn “Carried Away” an apt description for how I enthusiastically approach life and for what my Nordhavn will do for me.



Favorite sport – college football. Attending the Rose Bowl in 2013 “All Right Now!”

What's the funniest thing that has ever happened to you while going through the sales process?

Twice I've run out of diesel fuel, wasn't funny at the time, but easy to laugh at myself later. On a Nordhavn 40 pre-purchase trial run I was warming up the boat and explaining systems to the eventual buyer and got talking (fortunately) so long that the engine stopped. Whoops, the sound of silence is not what you want to hear from the main engine. Well, I hadn't checked the fuel supply line before start up. The seller closed it off whenever he left the boat so all I did was run main dry. I turned it into a quick lesson for the buyer on how to bleed the main (and he later bought the boat!). Another time I flew out to FL from CA to deliver a brand new Nordhavn 64. I had arrived late the night before and had to get up very early to meet at the boat for the closing. I was the captain and took us out a few miles near the Gulf Stream for the Offshore Delivery where we signed paperwork and shook hands. We were continuing on as an overnighter to Charleston so the new owner and his hired captain took the helm and I went back to the cockpit to relax. This was the culmination of over two years of work and it was very satisfying to turn over a great boat. I closed my eyes and almost immediately the the main shut down...what?! (Simon and Garfunkel – "The Sounds of Silence" is not music to my ears when I'm underway). By the time I raced up to the pilothouse they had started the wing engine and we were moving. Turns out during commissioning the sight glass for the day tank was closed off and none of us checked. So it was always full when we looked at it...a lesson that I have relearned more than once.



Commodore, 2011 Opening Day at Alamitos Bay Yacht Club in Long Beach, CA

What's the biggest mistake you see new owners make?

Spending time “fixing up their boat” (new or used) to make it perfect instead of leaving the dock and getting better acquainted with boat handling and operations. There is plenty of time to get things right, but you will be much happier if you first master docking and anchoring and then fuss with interior decor later.

Are you scared of spiders?

No, I wouldn't have one as a pet and prefer to find them than for them to find me. Heights really bother me. I am not at all good above sea level (planes are fine, tall buildings worry me, I stay well back behind the windows).



Obviously you've spent a lot of time in, on and around Nordhavns and as such, what is your favourite photo ever taken while at sea and why?

I have two. One on a Nordhavn and another from a regatta, both involve family.



Cruising with the GSSR fleet from Japan to Taiwan was a great father/son trip and I love the photo of my son Jonn slouched in the helm chair of the Nordhavn 62 Seabird talking on the VHF. Steven Argosy is in the background.



My other favorite photo is with my father when we won the NOSA Commodore's Challenge in 2011. He crewed for me and we took first place, it was great regatta made even more special by having Chas aboard trimming sails for me. (Yes, he's the other one wearing a Reyn Spooner aloha shirt!)

What would you never leave behind when heading out to sea?

My waterproof digital camera is an appendage. I love to take photos (I have a huge photo library with tens of thousands of images that includes shots of over 400 Nordhavns) and have a 16GB memory card so usually my battery runs out before I fill up my card. Waterproof for a good reason – I have gone swimming for my camera before. It's just a small pocket Olympus and I

prefer it to taking photos with an iPhone or with a fancy 35mm camera that has myriad lenses and settings, I'm more of a point and shoot guy, typically flash on, not too much to think about.



Jeff and Pam racing their Lido 14, we were fleet champions in 2011

Jeff, tell us something about yourself that nobody knows?

I had never done an overnight passage before joining PAE. It seems strange now because I have learned so much in the past 16 years and even write about and give lectures on cruising at night. I'm a fast learner and love to share what I know.



Jeff and Pam walking the docks at the Anacortes Trawler Fest, May 2015

Thank you very much for your time and all the very best with your new business.

Thanks James. May you and the crew of Pendana have many safe and memorable days aboard in your travels around the world!

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