

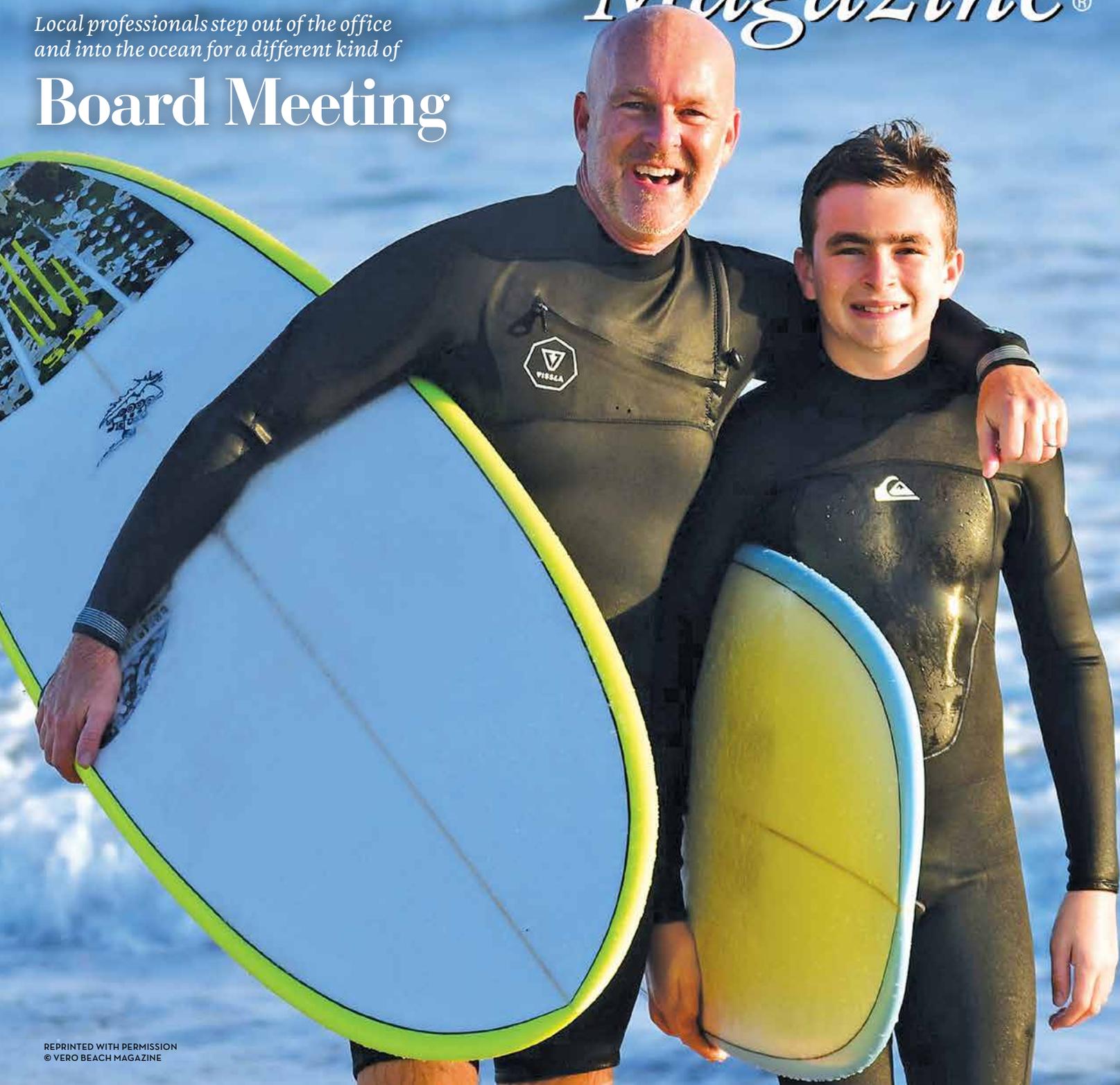
THE FIRST  THE ONLY

Vero Beach Magazine®

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*Local professionals step out of the office
and into the ocean for a different kind of*

Board Meeting



Board Meetings

MANY LOCAL PROFESSIONALS GET STOKED ABOUT CARRYING THEIR PASSION OUT OF THE OFFICE & ONTO THE WAVES

BY AMY ROBINSON



NAHU



BILL DAVIS

Tripp Hernandez and his son Noah enjoy a surf day at the Fort Pierce Inlet.

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Hernandez enjoys the waves of the Maldives during a visit to the South Asian island nation with several friends.



Before the eastern horizon lightens, the Dawn Patrol is on alert. An assortment of like-minded people check the conditions and quickly load cars with their surfboards. These aren't college kids or beach bums, but a group of local professionals engaged in highly skilled jobs who seek their opportunities both in the water and at work.

Jeff Pickering, president and CEO of Indian River Community Foundation, likens surfing principles to the way he approaches his work. "Know before you go," he

states. "Check the waves and weather, scan the horizon for opportunity or a potential problem and plan accordingly," he says.

The Community Foundation provides the services that a private foundation would, but makes it easier for clients, who can advise their own accounts. "In philanthropy, it is not about getting a client to set up the biggest account or give away the biggest grant, but when you can make a difference in the community," says Pickering.

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Jeff Pickering has been surfing the east coast of Florida since he was 10 years old.

“It is impossible to describe unless you’ve ridden the perfect wave.”

– JEFF PICKERING

“The paddle-out is comparable to a business environment; it takes a lot of work to get into the lineup,” he adds. “A lot of times the opportunities we pursue in my business take patience and timing. In surfing, too, the best rides come when you are in the right place at the right time. It is impossible to describe unless you’ve ridden the perfect wave, coasted off on the shoulder and could shout and hoot for joy.”

Pickering began surfing at the age of 10 while at New Smyrna Beach with his family. “I screwed up enough courage to approach the little hut with my \$5 bill and rent a well-used board,” he recalls. “I spent the next 60 minutes frothing in the afternoon surf, but

once I caught a wave, I was all in.”

Now, Pickering is on the Dawn Patrol text list, run by avid surfer Tripp Hernandez, a Realtor with Dale Sorensen Real Estate. “Paddling out just before dawn is when the magic happens,” says Hernandez. “As the sun comes up, the sky changes into amazing colors. You smile at your friends and realize you’re experiencing something very special.”

Hernandez notes the diversity of the group: “We have doctors, ex-NFL players, scientists, first responders and retirees.” Sometimes the call of a good wave will draw people from the office to take a long lunch hour. Pickering recalls one meeting that didn’t happen as

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Hernandez is part of a group of local professionals who find time around their workdays to take advantage of optimal surf conditions.



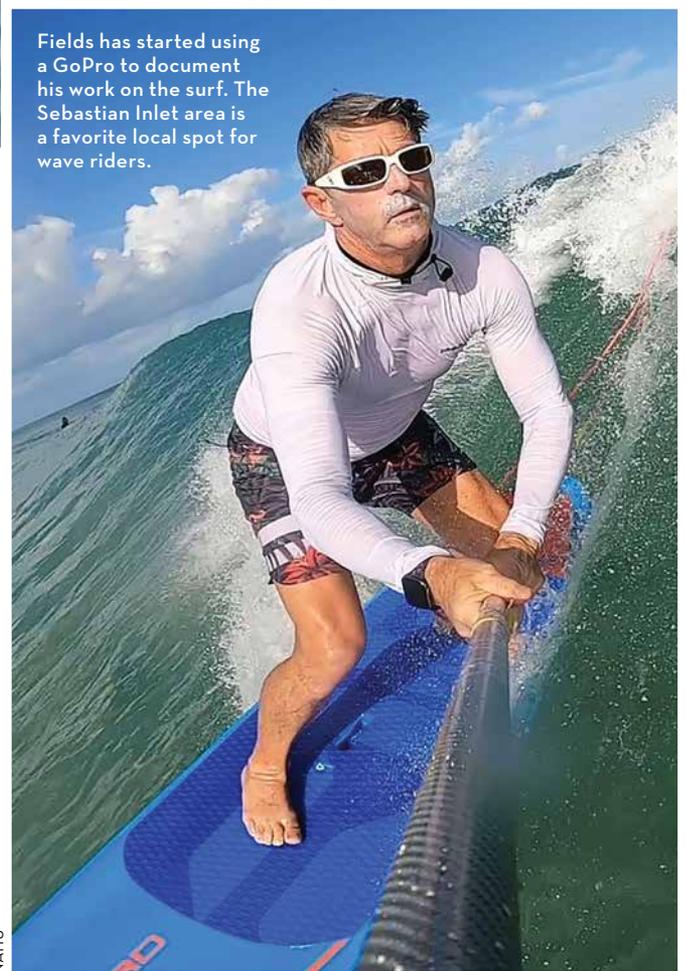
“Surfing is essential for me.”

– LUNDY FIELDS

planned. “I had a lunch scheduled with the son of a client, a college student who was in town on a semester break. Around 11 o’clock I got a message saying he had canceled.” Pickering checked the surf report and thought he would spend the lunch hour on his surfboard. “There was my client’s son, at the beach with some friends and their boards. Busted! We still laugh about that.”

Like many sports, surfing was male-dominated until women and girls began claiming their spots in the lineup. Marie O’Brien, manager of digital media and community outreach for The Learning Alliance, grew up in Pittsburgh and moved to Florida in her early 20s. “When I began surfing, the lineup was probably 90 percent male,” she recalls. That dynamic was not new to O’Brien, since she worked in tech marketing at AOL.

Once she tried surfing here in Vero Beach, she was quickly enamored of the sport. “I had a great teacher and caught a wave the first time I stood up,” she says. That teacher was John O’Brien, an avid surfer and kiteboarder who became her husband. He helped Marie hone her skills when they were dating. “I joke that I married my surfing instructor,” she laughs. The cou-



Fields has started using a GoPro to document his work on the surf. The Sebastian Inlet area is a favorite local spot for wave riders.

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ple's two daughters both love surfing, too. "It is much more than a sport for us. Our connection with surfing shapes our actions and life decisions," she says. When AOL closed its Vero Beach office, O'Brien was offered a plum position but would need to move to a landlocked city. "I decided to stay in Vero Beach and keep surfing," she says.

Water sports are often family affairs. Ronnie Lawn was just 4 years old when he piloted his first sailing craft by himself, a 7-foot pram sailing dinghy with a 3-foot, 8-inch beam. "We were a sailing family," says Lawn. "We lived on a small lake in Miami at the time, and there were always boats around. My father had an intercom system with a speaker mounted on the roof of the house. During my first solo sail, he broadcasted my instructions."

Lawn, a tax attorney and partner at Lawn & LeBlanc Law Group, considers surfing and sailing his long-term recreational loves. "Surfing felt to me like an extension of sailing," he explains. "When you start out in a larger sailboat, you generally turn the motor on and get out of the marina into open water, point the boat into the wind, and raise the sails while simultaneously turning

Below the Surface

It's not surprising that surfers' love for the ocean often prompts them to take leading roles in conservation. For example, the Surfrider Foundation, established in 1984 by a group of surfers from Malibu, California, has grown to 176 chapters and student clubs, including the Treasure Coast Chapter (treasurecoast.surfrider.org). Touting the motto "Protecting your oceans, beaches and waves," the group is passionate about water quality, plastic reduction, and beach cleanup.

Numerous other surfer-driven conservation organizations exist nationally and internationally, including the Save the Waves Coalition, 4Ocean, and Surfing for Change.

One of Florida's innovative ways of supporting conservation-minded surfers is the sale of the "Endless Summer" specialty license plate. In 2020, nearly



94,000 drivers opted for this plate, making it the top-selling specialty plate in the state. Proceeds fund an organization called Surfing's Evolution & Preservation Foundation (perservesurfingbeaches.org), which is engaged in public education about surfing and conservation, preservation of shoreline ecosystems, and beach cleanup efforts.

Local residents, surfers or not, who are interested in helping our oceans and waterways can contact Coastal Connections (coastal-connections.org) and learn about the nonprofit group's quarterly cleanups at coastal parks in Indian River County—during which about 100 pounds of debris are collected. Coastal Connections also supports recycling efforts and promotes alternatives to plastics, which can all too easily end up in the ocean.



Tax attorney Ronnie Lawn has been surfing since he was 12 years old.



off the motor. When you fall off the wind, the sails fill and the feeling of that mass continuing to move almost silently, picking up speed, is extraordinary.”

Lawn experiences the same feeling when surfing. “You paddle like mad and there is a moment when you feel the wave energy take over and you are gliding; it’s that same sensation.” Lawn was a rakish 12-year-old when his father took him to a surf shop for his first board. “I was eyeing some Hobie surfboards, and the owner of the shop came up and said, ‘Stop looking; there is only one board for you.’ It was the shortest he had at 9 feet, 2 inches—still a bit big for me,” he laughs. “My nickname at the time was ‘Jockey.’”

Occasionally, when conditions are good, the Riomar break affords the longest rides in Vero Beach. Lundy Fields has been surfing for 50 years and knows the nuances of his favorite spots. “Just off the Riomar golf course, there are four rows of reefs going out,” he says. “When swells are large enough, you get carried over all four reefs for a nice long ride.”

Offshore hurricanes attract locals awaiting some

“Surfing keeps me 100 percent in the moment.”

– RYAN COBB

special conditions. “When Hurricane Larry went by last summer, it was a thousand miles away, but it still pushed in those waves,” Fields explains. “The locals all turned out at Riomar and got great rides over those reefs.”

Fields is president and CEO of the Visiting Nurse Association of the Treasure Coast. His connection to surfing helped him cope with the never-before-seen challenges caused by the pandemic. “Surfing is essential for me,” he declares. “Rest means different things to different people, and for me, surfing provides the rest I need. It gives me a way to regenerate and gain strength.”

Fields may view surfing as restful, but watching him fly over the water using a wind foil on a special board looks more like an adrenaline rush than a relaxing ride. Wingfoiling is an emerging sport that mirrors the speed and excitement of windsurfing. The rider holds a wing, which is not attached to the board, like a sail. Mounted below the board, a 2-to-3-foot mast extends into the water at a 90-degree angle and connects to the hydro-foil, a glider-shaped wing. “When the wind fills your wing, the foil under the board actually lifts it up out of the water as you ride,” explains Fields. “It feels almost like flying an airplane with your feet.”



Marie O'Brien and her husband, John, flank daughters Kirra and Kelly as they emerge from the ocean onto Jacksonville Beach during a family surfing excursion.

“[Surfing] keeps me in shape mentally and physically.”

– FRANCINE GRIFFIN

Francine Griffin moved her three young children back to Vero Beach from Washington state in 2013, and the first thing they did was hit the beach. “I ran into an old flame at the North Jetty in Fort Pierce,” Griffin recalls. “We started spending every possible hour getting my kids comfortable in the water.” She was a bit nervous watching her children and decided that if they were going to do it, she would, too.

“Learning to surf at almost 40 years old wasn’t easy,” she laughs. “Some days it’s like I’m starting all over, especially after sitting in a chair staring at a computer for nine hours a day.” Griffin is the controller at RedStick Golf Club. “Even when my body does not want to respond to the demands of surfing, I love it regardless. It keeps me in shape mentally and physically.”

There are days at work when Griffin will sneak a peek at live cameras showing surf conditions. “Occasionally, the waves are firing but I have a real board



Francine Griffin took up surfing later in life when her three sons took to their boards. The Fort Pierce Inlet is a favorite local spot for her family.



Ryan Cobb shares his love of the water with his niece Renee, nephew Andres, son Charlie, and nephew Liam. Cobb's family likes gathering near the Sebastian Inlet and enjoying the waves.



meeting as opposed to the kind of board meeting I'd rather be at." Griffin tries to surf as much as she can after work with her children. "It's definitely difficult because nonsurfers really don't understand that when the conditions are good, we just don't know when it is going to be like that again," she explains. "If it is raining on the golf course, there is always tomorrow."

The many hours of family time in the water worked magic on her boys. "Gabe and Jake have been competing in various surf contests all over the east coast of Florida," she says. "Last September, we spent a week in Nag's Head, North Carolina for the Eastern Surfing Association East Coast Championships, where Gabe finished fourth in the Junior Men Under 18 Shortboard Division."

For many, surfing brings back memories of carefree youth. Ryan Cobb, a CPA and wealth strategist at Northern Trust, recalls a very steep learning curve starting at age 15 when he and a tight group of friends first waded into the water with their boards. "Surfing is a

very humbling sport," he says. "It took me almost three years before I could get to my feet consistently and truly experience the joy of riding a wave. That feeling is one I am happy to chase for the rest of my life."

Work obligations mean that squeezing in an hour for surfing is more special than ever, and one of the few times Cobb is not multitasking. "Surfing keeps me 100 percent in the moment," he says. Like most surfers, he'll check conditions online, but it is not the same as being there. "Now, when I look out over the dune and see ideal surf conditions, I practically skip back to the car for my board," he laughs. "I can't get in the water fast enough."

The stoke that surfers talk about is hard to define, but the euphoria described is universal among the tribe of people who paddle out to grab a ride. Even if time spent surfing has to be sandwiched in between meetings and phone calls, the prospect of slowing to the ocean's pace and marveling at swells traveling thousands of miles to affect our shores is the very definition of quality time. ☼