



Captain Kristi Schooley: Navigating a New Career in Midlife

Kristi Schooley says if she ever writes an autobiography, the title will be this: It's Never Too Late to Correct Course.

When she was in her early 40s, Schooley, now 63, launched a career in the maritime industry after more than two decades working in hospitality. She's now the senior captain of a ship for a daytime tour company in Seattle, Washington.

"It was a huge leap to go from providing the waitstaff for events to being responsible for the safety and well-being of a ship, the crew, and hundreds of passengers," says Schooley.

She found the perfect fit for her second act, but the journey to a new career was turbulent at times.

Learning to Serve

Schooley, the youngest of six children, was introduced to hospitality at a young age.

Her father was a long-haul truck driver. Her mother worked as a waitress at the revolving restaurant in Seattle's famous Space Needle, the iconic landmark with panoramic views of the city and beyond.

Schooley and her siblings occasionally accompanied their mother to work. "We'd do our homework in the break room from the 600-foot level," she says.

Schooley followed in her mother's footsteps, working as a server at several restaurants, including one

her parents owned for a few years.

Eventually, her mom started her own business, Always at Your Service, which provided trained service staff for parties and other occasions. It was a family affair. Schooley and her siblings helped with every aspect.

"We took care of staff and staging for everything from intimate dinners for two to events with 800 people at large venues," she says. "We worked at weddings, holiday parties, corporate parties, and team-building events, as well as on private yachts and daytime cruise boats."

Their customers included corporate executives, bureaucrats, and wealthy entrepreneurs. The business took off during the late 1980s and early 1990s. "People who worked for Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, created a ton of business," she says.

Keeping Her Head Above Water

Throughout her 20s and 30s, Schooley worked nights, weekends, and holidays while also raising two daughters on her own. "My hours were all over the place," she says. "There were no set workdays or benefits to the job. I was running from one event to another, making sure staff showed up."



Working at the company and being a mom was exhausting, but her siblings would help with

babysitting when they weren't pitching in at the family business.

To escape the pressures of work, Schooley went out on the water. "I had a little motorboat that I could tool around in with my daughters."

Schooley developed a love for boating when she was a child, during a trip to a lake with family and friends. "I remember the first time someone held me while skiing," she says. "I have a vivid memory of the joy of the water."

In 1998, Schooley took over running the business when her mother retired. That same year, she got married and moved with her husband, Pete Sandall, to an area of Seattle where it was difficult to keep her boat—so she sold it.

But she missed being on the water and, after a few years, she started thinking about ways to subsidize her hobby.

Charting Unfamiliar Territory

There was a Seattle Maritime Academy near her home. "One day I was driving by, and I pulled in," she says. "I asked them what it would entail to get a license to run a little boat."

The staff explained the cost and time involved. "I enrolled that same day," she says. "I just wanted to dip my toe in to see what it would take."

Her goal was to get a license to run a small commercial boat offering charters for up to six passengers, but academy personnel recommended she get a master's license instead—one that would allow her to operate a vessel of up to 100 gross tons.

The test was similar, but there were key differences involving the size of the boat and the sea time she would need before she could apply for a license. Sea time is the number of hours a person has spent working on a vessel.

Training included an 80-hour course that would prepare her to take the licensing test. This training was broken into three parts: learning the rules of the water, charting courses, and studying federal regulation codes that pertain to maritime law.

Schooley was in a class with crab fishermen from Alaska, yacht delivery people, a water taxi service operator, and an employee of Argosy Cruises, which offers sightseeing tours on Elliott Bay, Lake Washington, and areas of Puget Sound.

After she passed the course, she worked for Argosy Cruises to earn her required sea time, which was the equivalent of 365 eight-hour days. "I already had some sea time from catering events on private yachts, but I still needed a lot of additional work," she says.



Steering Her Career in a New Direction

In 2004, Schooley started work as a deckhand for Argosy Cruises, where she learned the mechanics of maritime diesel engines, radio communication, how to raise and lower fenders, basic knots, and line-handling skills for securing the ship.

"I had to learn to safely tie up a vessel, securing it to the dock with primary lines," she says. "I had to draw a schematic of the vessel, with the details of everything from the hatches and holes to electrical equipment and the lifesaving equipment onboard."

There were times she doubted her new direction. "When I started as a deckhand, there was a horrible storm that came through with 40-mile-an-hour winds. It got rougher and rougher, to the extent that a refrigerator fell off the wall. I really did stop and wonder if this was the career for me."

She couldn't afford to quit her hospitality job while she was taking the class and doing various jobs on the ship, so she continued to run the family business. "I worked 60 to 80 hours a week," she says. "It was rough."

Also, there was a lot to learn about driving on water. "To become a captain, you have to know how to safely navigate a ship while managing a crew," she says. "You have to pilot the vessel in all kinds of weather conditions, including winds, fog, and rain. I learned to drive by instrument with no visibility. The training was much harder than I expected."



In 2005, Schooley got her 100-ton master's license and began working full time for Argosy Cruises.

She decided to close the family business. "It was difficult to end that chapter," she says. "But I felt like I was on two treadmills at the same time, and I had to jump off one."

Landing in an Important Role

As a senior captain, Schooley can pilot all the ships in the company's fleet. She is currently in charge of the 125-foot Salish Explorer, Argosy Cruises' largest ship. "This just became my baby," she says. "Every year, we switch to a different boat."



“The vessel can carry more than 500 passengers, but we usually only take about 200 to 300 passengers per trip in peak season,” she says. During the summer, she’s in charge of six one-hour cruises a day on Elliott Bay.

“When I’m driving the ship, I’m focused on navigation, communication, and visibility,” she says. “I’m monitoring three radios. I’m constantly watching everything, including ferry traffic, recreational vessel traffic, and fishing boats.”

The ship has five crew members, one of whom is a senior deckhand. The deckhands must check in with her regularly. She also watches the cameras around the ship to check passengers’ safety.

“Every single person must carry their weight,” she says. “It’s a well-oiled machine. As a ship’s captain, you have to trust yourself, trust your crew, and trust your instruments. It’s a massive amount of responsibility, but I have crew members who help manage the vessel.”

Running a Tight Ship

Schooley still uses her well-honed hospitality skills. “If we have a private chartered cruise with caterers,” she says, “I make sure all the elements come together at the right time, including the catering service, music, and decorations.” She even officiates weddings occasionally.

AS CAPTAIN, MANY HATS

Schooley is one of Argosy Cruises' four senior captains, out of 15 captains. Besides driving ships for the company, she has a wide range of other duties.

She's part of the company's management team and oversees Coast Guard inspections of vessels, assists in planning shipyard repair work, and trains crew members.

It's her responsibility to make sure the vessel she pilots is always Coast Guard-inspection ready, which means the safety gear is well stored and ready to deploy in an emergency. That equipment includes inflatable rafts and floats, fire pumps, hoses, and first-aid supplies.

Plus, she must make sure the crew has completed all the required safety drills, including fire safety procedures, man-overboard exercises, and anchor and abandon-ship processes. During the Christmas holidays, she supervises a team that decorates the inside of the vessels for the company's Christmas Ship Festival. "It's a magical experience," she says.

Schooley's husband says the maritime career combines his wife's hospitality skills with her love for being on the water.

"When she's in the wheelhouse, she's clearly the captain," Sandall says. "There's no messing around. She's got radios, and she's on the ball, looking around."

"She's in charge," he says. "It's impressive—all the hats she has to wear."

Tricia Nielsen, a friend, former colleague at Argosy Cruises, and classmate at the maritime academy, says Schooley runs a tight ship in a supportive way that makes crew members feel appreciated, so they strive to do their best. One key to her success is that she takes the time to build relationships, Nielsen says.

At this stage of her life, Schooley says she's exactly where she wants to be. "I'm happy being on the water, and I'm happy being around other people who love working on boats.

"Every day I go to work is a gift," she says. "I have the best office in the world. The only regret I have is that I didn't do it sooner."

Written By Nanci Hellmich. Photos by Azul Photography.

Nanci Hellmich, an award-winning multimedia reporter, covered myriad topics for *USA TODAY* for more than 30 years. Now she writes for *AARP*, *encore.org*, and other organizations. She's been named a top online influencer on weight loss and nutrition and has appeared on numerous television shows including NBC's *TODAY*.

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