



STATE OF WASHINGTON BOARD OF PILOTAGE COMMISSIONERS

BPC Mission: to ensure against the loss of lives, loss of or damage to property and vessels, and to protect the marine environment by maintaining efficient and competent pilotage service on our State's inland waters.

THE BPC PILOTAGE QUARTERLY

From Elementary School to Pilotage – With a Couple of Side Quests Along the Way

WINTER 2026
Special
Edition

Joel Michelson and Harlow Wood met in Kindergarten. Last Fall, they both became Puget Sound Pilots. Here's what happened in between!

For those not familiar with the process in Washington State, becoming a pilot is a multi-year commitment that takes an incredible amount of time, determination, and resilience. Not to mention a willingness to dedicate everything toward a goal where there are no guarantees of success. It's a career track - and leap of faith - that isn't for everyone. But it was for Joel and Harlow.

The two grew up in Poulsbo, Washington - a small town across the water from Seattle. They played sports together, went to each other's birthday parties, and shared classrooms until Joel changed schools at the start of fourth grade. They didn't see much of each other again until high school. Even then they travelled in different circles for the most part. Joel remembers this as, "we were friendly, but more acquaintances since we



Captains Joel Michelson (top row) and Harlow Wood (second row from top) in their kindergarten class.

were on different trajectories. I wasn't the most studious kid in high school." The two parted ways again after high school. But not for long.

Joel's Path

Joel remembers always wanting to work on the water, with the goal of becoming a Puget Sound pilot. "I've always loved being on the water. I grew up going to work with my dad on the ferries, and I remember sleeping on the chart table when he went to the oil dock in the middle of the night. I kind of always had my sights set on becoming a pilot." But budget reductions across the ferry system made it difficult to get started. In 1999, Joel and a few friends drove from Poulsbo to Seattle, waiting overnight outside the union hall hoping to get on a list for Washington State Ferries (WSF). "Back then, you stood in a line that went around the block. It's funny, because the internet wasn't as prevalent then. You had to check the newspaper the night before. And they wouldn't even tell you where the line was going to be, because there was so much interest in maybe getting a job there. So, you'd show up, then wait for hours to even just put your name in the hat and maybe get a call to work on the ferries."

Joel decided to start working on an associate's degree in art photography while waiting for an opportunity with WSF. During the final quarter, he was invited to study abroad for two months in Italy. "I got a call from the ferries and interviewed right before leaving. About a month into my trip, I was offered a position and had to decide – do I come home early for this job? It meant flying home 2-3 weeks early, which is



BPC Chair Sheri Tonn (right) presenting a WA State Pilot License to Captain Michelson.

Joel's Path (cont'd)

a long time when you're a 20-year-old kid in Italy. I decided to come home and that choice started me down this path."

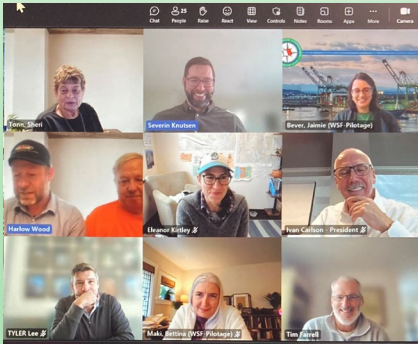
Joel joined WSF as an Ordinary Seafarer (OS) in 2002. At the same time, he was also pursuing a degree in Art Photography at Western Washington University. Over the next six years, he continued to advance at work, becoming an AB and then Unlimited Inland Chief Mate.

Harlow's Path

After high school, Harlow wanted to do his undergrad studies in a major port. Somewhere he could play sports and get a good education. He decided on the United States Merchant Marine Academy, which offered a four-year program that included 360 days out at sea. After completion of the United States Merchant Marine Academy (Kings Point, New York) Harlow graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Marine Transportation and a Third Mate Ocean Unlimited License. He wanted to go to law school in a port city and went to Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville Florida.

With his Mate's license and Law degree in hand, Harlow then decided to move back to Washington in 2008. There were limited opportunities due to recession, and associate lawyer positions were scarce. So, Harlow decided to keep his options open. "I had a Third Mate Oceans License from the Merchant Marine Academy. So, my backup plan was to apply with the ferries while I was looking for a job as an associate lawyer. This also kept me on the path of becoming a pilot and or becoming a lawyer. Then I found out I passed the Washington State Bar Exam and started my first day of working on the ferries within two or three weeks of each other. I thought, let's see how this goes while I keep looking for legal work. or do legal work on the side."

He started working on the ferries as an OS in 2009 and quickly moved up to AB while waiting for the next Mate Orientation – a requirement of WSF before moving to a deck officer position. "Starting as an OS even though I had a license, could have been a tough pill to swallow. But I had a goal of becoming a pilot - this job was the way into the ferries and a way to stay home while still working in the industry. It allowed me to stay on the path to becoming a pilot. And I could be home with my family every day, instead of being out at sea."



Captain Harlow Wood (middle row, far left) received his license at an online meeting of the BPC.

Reconnecting

Fast-forward about 10 years later and those trajectories intersected again with a phone call. Harlow remembers working nights as an AB and talking to others about becoming a mate. Someone mentioned that Joel was working toward the upcoming Mate Orientation. "Hey, I know Joel. So, I gave him a call." Joel was preparing for the Mate Orientation with WSF and got this unexpected phone call. As Joel tells it, "I'd just finished drawing my last chart and I get this random call from a guy I hadn't heard from in almost 10 years. It was Harlow. We hadn't spoken since high school, but he'd just been hired on at ferries and was also interested in the upcoming Mate Orientation. So, we met at a coffee shop to talk about how I approached the chart process. After that point, our lives have been completely aligned."

That isn't an exaggeration. Three years after completing the Mate Orientation, Joel and Harlow became captains with WSF. Five years later they applied for the same pilotage exam. They were study partners – working together through the months of intense preparation. They proceeded to enter the trainee program with Puget Sound Pilots at the same time. And, in September and October (respectively), both completed licensure – joining as PSP's newest pilots.

Preparing for the Exam

As study partners. Joel and Harlow used a somewhat unique approach to preparing for the exam. A combination of structured focus, accountability, and finding study partners with diverse industry experience. Harlow describes this as, "studying how to study before we started studying. We looked at research around effective approaches and found a guideline of set blocks of focus time, with small breaks in between. So, we set an alarm for 40 minutes and then took 10 minutes to stretch and refresh. Maybe longer if there was a concept we weren't getting. Then we'd reset the alarm and go back to it." Joel recalls the benefit as two-fold: having someone to talk through the extremely complex and technical materials, but also the day-to-day of not going it alone.

Preparing for the Exam (cont'd)

"Having a study partner was invaluable. If I didn't know something, I was able to run it by him and vice versa. Or if he didn't know, we were able to work together and parse it out toward an answer. And when the hard days come, having that extra, 'Hey, see you at 6:00 AM' really helps." Harlow agrees, "I would not have studied for 12-14 hours for six weeks without knowing Joel was right there doing the same thing".

They also created study groups with people from other parts of the industry (deep sea, tugs, out-of-state ferries). "Connecting with people from different regions and industry backgrounds – you can bounce ideas off each other. You get a deeper understanding and can talk through how something would work in the real world. Everybody brings their own strengths to becoming a pilot, and a big part of that is the variety of vessel types and different shiphandling experiences. These are advanced mariners from all over the country. Working together enhances the overall understanding because it introduces so many different perspectives."

When asked about the intensity of the exam and simulator, Harlow likened the process to his experience passing the Washington State Bar exam. "The pressure to do well is extremely high for both, it's difficult to say which one was harder. With the bar exam, you need a passing score and can take it again if you fail. With the pilotage exam, you have to wait - potentially years - for the next one. And with the pilotage exam, you're also competing to get the highest score. The strategic preparation, sustained effort, and self-direction that goes into passing the pilotage exam is on par with passing the bar exam. And then you have to get through the simulator. Most people can relate - the bar exam, that's not easy. Becoming a doctor, that's not easy. Becoming a pilot, that's not easy." "Most people have an understanding that completing law school and passing a state bar exam is a difficult achievement and not easy."

Training Program

PSP's training program is designed to develop the technical skills, knowledge of local waterways, and shiphandling needed for pilotage. There is a close working relationship with pilots, crew, and other trainees. The focus shifts from competitive (highest score on the exam and simulator), to collaboration and learning from each other. Harlow sums it up as, "you're in a program with five to nine people, all from different backgrounds. Now it's more about 'how can we help each other?' 'How'd that job go?' 'How can we all become better?'. That's the goal, become a productive and effective trainee. And how to develop into becoming a pilot. Joel agrees, adding "working with 57 different pilots means learning 57 different ways to do a job, and that's a good thing. At PSP right now, there's 57 different ways to become a pilot. Having people ahead of you that have seen it, done it, it's nice to have those people to rely on and questions".



Captains Michelson (left) and Wood (right) in a simulator during the pilot training program.

Closing – Full Circle Story

Looking back at the journey, Harlow reflects as, "we took different paths, but both ended up pretty much in the same spot. Even working on the ferries, we did the same path of OS to captain in completely different ways. Joel summarized it as, "we hit it hard. We hit it really hard. But we made it. It was worth it." And it doesn't stop there. Now their kids play sports together and have developed close friendships. Their wives are good friends and frequently spend time together. Meanwhile, Joel and Harlow continue learning, looking forward to being that mentor or offering support to the next generation of pilots in Washington State.

Calls to Action!

Watch for more on their story as well as our #PathtoPilotage series on our socials! [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#)

If you're considering pilotage in Washington, or want to learn more about the 2026 exam, visit our [website](#). If you're curious about working at Washinton State Ferries, find out more at <https://wsdot.wa.gov/travel/washington-state-ferries/about-us/employment-washington-state-ferries>.