



Water Festival's only two (living) female Commodores talk about lifting lumber, "first dudes," and the perils of being a womanly Whistler...

(Sheri Little and Erin Dean with Sammy Gray, the Festival's oldest living Commodore.)

The first female Commodore of the Beaufort Water Festival was Ms. Mazie Terhune, back in 1959, when the festival was in its fourth year. It was almost 50 years before another woman would be elevated to the coveted position. Erin Dean received the honor in 2007, and in 2011, Sheri Little followed in her footsteps. We asked Erin and Sheri, the only living female Commodores of the Beaufort Water Festival, to share some thoughts on their experience.

Erin Dean: I had been a volunteer with Water Festival since 1993 when I helped with the Treasurer's office. The next year, I was asked to be Shannon Erickson's t-shirt chairperson (she was the Sales and Admissions coordinator that year) and got struck with the Water Festival fever. By the time I was elected Commodore, I had a pretty good working knowledge of the practical aspects of the Festival, as well as its rich history. Being the first female in approximately fifty years to get the job, I did feel a tremendous sense of pressure to "get it right." I had some very supportive mentors in the Past Commodores, who gave me great advice throughout my Water Festival career, and I did not want to disappoint them. I also had a fantastic crew who worked very hard and made me look good. While being elected Commodore was one of the most memorable moments in my life, what really mattered was the strong bonds

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and eternal friendships that I have as a result of being one of many in the Water Festival family. I did pass a bit of advice to the next female in the ranks early on to ensure her success: "Lift lumber" and definitely let them see you sweat!

Sheri Little: Erin had the "mentoring" thing down pat. Yes, she told me many times to make sure I carried my own weight when it came to the physical aspect of volunteering. "Lift lots of lumber and get dirty if you want to get anywhere," she always said to me! For 10 years, during the nightly concerts, when the ladies attending the Water Festival looked so pretty in their sundresses, I kept telling myself the blood, sweat and grime I was sporting would pay off, and one day I, too, could once again wear a cute little summer sundress to a Water Festival concert. But until then, there was lots of work to be done! There are no words to describe the humble feeling I had when I was called into the board meeting right after the Water Festival Board of Directors voted me in as the 2010 Commodore. To hold such a position among such esteemed members of our community was overwhelming. Who was I?? I had come to Beaufort 20 years earlier as a young, naive military wife, and now I was going to be part of Beaufort's rich and storied history. To know the board had enough confidence in me to lead the city's preeminent festival was overwhelming and, of course, challenging and intimidating. But I had a great group of past Commodores to lean on for advice and support throughout my planning year. Best of all, I was able to follow in the footsteps of Commodore Dean, who, in her red high heels, tenaciously blazed a trail for all future women Commodores!

Erin Dean: Well done, grasshopper!

Sheri Little: Some smart, cute chick taught me everything I know.

Actually, I never even gave a thought to becoming Commodore in the early years. I just wanted to do a good job, not disappoint anyone, get into the concerts for free, wear my free t-shirt and drink my free beer. I was completely content with that. ☐ It was probably about my third year as a Coordinator (one of the people who sit around the table and do the year-round planning), that it dawned on me that I really could become a Commodore some day. It's a bit of an eye-opener when that thought strikes you because you begin to see the festival and its operation through far less "myopic" eyes. You begin to see the bigger picture... how the festival is about the community and all the work involved in weaving all the entities together in order to produce it – the city, the police, the military, the civic organizations, the patrons. The Waterfront Park really becomes like a mini-city during Festival, with it's own government and infrastructure. It's quite amazing. ☐ Secretly, I was scared to death inside when I became Commodore, but I tried never to show it. I was extremely lucky to have Erin to follow. She proved to the few "Good Ole Boys" that a woman could do the job and do it well. By the time I became Commodore a few years

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later, I didn't feel there was any real battle of the sexes going on. It was fun to joke about, but in all honesty, there was a tremendous amount of support for both Erin and myself from many of the older gentleman Commodores. So I don't think women were purposely being excluded from the opportunity to wear red britches. I think it was simply that it takes a tremendous amount of hard work, dedication and self-sacrifice to get to the top in this organization and Erin was the first woman to whole-heartedly make that commitment to do it. (She's stubborn like that.) She never gave up, and because of that, she truly blazed a trail for other women to follow, while at the same time, she raised the bar in regards to the organization's professionalism and selfless dedication to the community and patrons.

Erin Dean: Aw shucks Sheri...

I, on the other hand, had my eye on the prize from the moment I found out that there was a hierarchy within the Festival (being both Type A and a control freak, not making it was never a consideration for me). I worked very hard in every position I was given over the years and believe that through that hard work, I earned the trust and respect of the Commodores so that when it came time for me to be nominated, I had everyone's support (well, that I know of). I actually think the past Commodores were more concerned about me becoming a Whistler than Commodore!

Sheri Little: They worried about her, ahem, "eyeballs!" They are much larger than the "eyeballs" of a male Whistler. LOL. We made sunglasses to cover her eyes!

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