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Siblings at the Helm Keeping Sea Tow on Course
Brother-Sister team reflect on their history with, and ownership of, Sea Tow Services International

SOUTHOLD, NY — April 9, 2020 — Running a business as a brother and sister team has its highs and lows – especially when the company is rapidly growing and expanding nationally – but when difficult times hit such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the strength of that sibling relationship can be what leads to success or failure.

For nearly the last 20 years, brother and sister Capt. Joseph Frohnhoefer, III and Kristen Frohnhoefer have been an integral part of Sea Tow Services International, Inc. Though it's network of Sea Tow franchisees, it provides on-water assistance such as towing, fuel deliveries, jump starts and more for boaters across the United States through 110 areas of operation that employee more than 650 individuals.

When told of National Siblings Day in April, Kristen, who is President of Sea Tow, noted that she and her brother know what it's like to not only be strong siblings, but how to successfully run a company together through all sorts of times and trials.

"The strength of our relationship as brother and sister is one of the things that helps us and our company get through tough times," Kristen said. "We've seen industry disruptions, some local and some national like major hurricanes, the gulf oil spill, the economic downturn in 2008 and the current pandemic. Through it all, we have always respected each other's strengths and weaknesses and it's what has contributed to our success."

The siblings' success is remarkable, not only because they conquered the challenges of sustaining and growing the thriving company, but they have also overcome major hurdles. On March 24, 2015, after a brief battle with cancer, their dad Captain Joseph Frohnhoefer, Jr., who was the founder and CEO of Sea Tow, passed away peacefully at age 71. Known throughout the boating industry as "Captain Joe," he created a company that now Joseph and Kristen would have to officially take over.

"Sea Tow has a network of franchises that are supported by a strong system, and that's what helps us successfully get through times like these," said Joseph, who is CEO of Sea Tow. "Whether it's COVID or any other issue, it's the strength of the Sea Tow system that helps us push through these times. Our franchisees have more say in our system than most franchise-operated companies. Their captains and their staff are in the know, so it shortens that communications gap in why and how to respond in certain situations."

Shortly after their dad passed away, Joseph and Kristen changed their titles to what they are today. Joseph always focused on the external operations and legal aspects of the company, while Kristen focused on the internal operations of the business such as the company's call center, marketing, technology, membership and programs.

"It's really a great thing when you think about it because some family businesses just don't make it to the next generation," Joseph said. "We have such different skill sets, knowledge and experience that we complement each other. We're a team that works very well together."

How It All Began

When Sea Tow was first started in 1983, Joseph was 8 and his sister Kristen was 12. The company was started in Southold, NY by their dad Capt. Joseph Frohnhoefer as a way to help boaters that needed on-the-water service after the Coast Guard stopped responding to non-emergency situations. When the siblings became teenagers, they naturally became more involved in their family's business. Kristen worked closely with her mom Georgia Frohnhoefer on the back-office side of the business, managing phones and handling calls for assistance on the radio. Her brother essentially became Capt. Joe's first mate and went out on calls with his dad to help boaters in and around Eastern Long Island.

When both siblings graduated from high school, they ventured out on their own, which would garner them the experience needed to one day return and run the company together. Joseph received his Bachelor of Engineering in Naval Architecture from SUNY Maritime College in New York as well as his US Coast Guard Third Mates license. After graduating and spending one more summer on the water with Sea Tow he joined his first merchant cargo ship as Third Mate. Joseph spent the next four and a half years on cargo ships such as Car Carriers, Tankers and Container ships running cargo overseas, coastwise U.S. and through the Panama Canal and down the West coast of South America. After so much time away, and earning his 1600-ton Master/Chief Mate, All Oceans, All Seas license, Joseph decided to return home as the company was converting to a network of franchises.

Kristen got her Bachelor's degree in Spanish along with her teaching certification from Dickinson College, followed by her master's in education from Johns Hopkins University while teaching middle school and high school Spanish and French for 10 years in Maryland.

"During the summers, I would come home and work for mom and dad, answering phones and taking calls on the radio," Kristen said. "The 90s were the years of significant growth for Sea Tow and every summer I could tell that the company was changing. Both Joseph and I were doing our own things, but we kept connected to Sea Tow and what was happening."

In the early 2000s, Sea Tow was really starting to grow as the company moved from licensing to franchising. At the time, Kristen had not yet returned to help with the company, but as Capt. Joseph began spending more and more time in the business, he knew he was going to need help. He also knew the person he needed to call.

"I still remember that phone call to this day," Kristen said. "It was November of 2002, and I got a phone call from Joseph saying, 'you need to come home now.' While I hadn't thought about leaving my teaching job in the middle of the school year, I started having serious conversations and ended up resigning in January 2003."

In January, Joseph and one of Kristen's friends drove to Maryland and helped pack Kristen's belongings and move her back home to Southold.

"You're my best hire ever!" Capt. Joseph will often tell his sister.

Kristen notes that she and her brother always had respect for each other's talents and skills, but they became closer as they worked closer together.

"We each have certain things that we took on in the business," Joseph said. "Early on, mom and dad had us doing everything, whether it was stuffing envelopes, taking calls, answering the phones, working in each department to learn the overall business or me going out with dad and other Sea Tow captains on the water to learn all aspects of towing, salvage, spill response and more. When we returned to Sea Tow full time in the early 2000s our father ensured that we 'started at the bottom'. We learned the business inside and out, and that's why we're successful today."

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About Sea Tow Services International, Inc.
Sea Tow Services International Inc., better known as Sea Tow®, is *Your Road Service at Sea®*. Since 1983, Sea Tow has been the innovative leader of on-water assistance, servicing the United States, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Members are provided with a 24/7 direct connection with Coast Guard-licensed captains should they need help. The pioneering concept, founded by Captain Joseph Frohnhoefer, was established in Southold, NY when the United States Coast Guard ceased response to non-emergency assistance calls.

In addition to on-water assistance, the network handles salvage and recovery, and responds to natural disasters, environmental hazards and oil spill cleanups. Sea Tow also promotes boating safety as does the 501(c)3 organization, the Sea Tow Foundation, and its members save on boat insurance through Sea Insure®.

Visit seatow.com to learn more.