

Key Information:

Names: Dave and Jennifer Peterson

Age:

Current Cabin: 73

Date of interview: February 5th, 2017

Interview: Sophia Howard (University of Puget Sound)

Ethnographic Preface:

The day I met with Dave and Jennifer, it happened to be a downpour of rain. The cold, wet slaps of raindrops glistened as they fell on the wooden staircase leading down towards the main residences. Even on this rainy Sunday afternoon, I was eager to explore the mystical Salmon Beach community. Once I made my way to cabin 73, I was introduced to both Dave and Jennifer as well as their beloved dog and family friend who was staying with them at the time. As I entered their home, I instantly noticed the warmth and contentedness between the couple. Their welcoming nature and openness to share their narrative brought much ease to interview process. Within the time frame of our interview, they both discussed the life that they had led for the past 20 years. Their fond memories of serendipitously finding their home, and raising their two daughters, have all been pleasant moments for them. We also touched on how Salmon Beach has changed since they first moved to the community. By the end of the interview, I could tell that Dave and Jennifer's community and home was so much more than just an environment; it is a place where their lives had begun, and neither of them can imagine living anywhere else.

Transcription:

Sophia: What made you decide to move to this community?

Jennifer: 1986, in June, we read an ad in a paper that said "cozy cottage for sale." We had never heard of Salmon Beach before. I knew Vashon Island well, and we had lived in Tacoma by PLU [Pacific Lutheran University] because we both studied there. But we checked out the ad, and when we got there, we just swung our legs off the deck. We looked at each other and said "we need to buy it!"

Dave: I said – well we were only there for five minutes. I turned to her and said, "if we don't buy this we would be absolutely out of our minds." Then I said, "If we buy this house, you know, we'll have to get married."

Jennifer: Well that's how it happened. We weren't married yet. And we didn't really know the community – didn't really know Salmon Beach, but it was all very exciting.

Dave: Well – I actually did. I use to sail a lot, and I knew about Salmon Beach. But I didn't know how to get there. But I worked as a counselor at a group home, and the cook had a son who lived down here. And she used to always tell me stories about Johnny at Salmon Beach – stories like whether or not they will get their land taken away from them or not. It was always a little bit of a mystery...

Sophia: Where did you grow up?

Dave: Well, I grew up in Bainbridge island. My dad was a Pastor, and the parsonage that his church owned was right by the water. That's where I grew up, from when I was four years old and for the next ten years. I have water in my blood, so I always wanted to live by the water.

Jennifer: And I guess I had something similar. My grandparents – well, I grew up in Eastern Washington on a cattle ranch. But my grandparents were on the water on Vashon Island. I spent a lot of time there.

Sophia: Your house is so beautiful. Did it always look like this or have you made improvements on it?

Dave: No, no – it was a little 700 square foot cabin, with two little bedrooms and a tiny little bathroom.

[They pull out an old painting that they made of what the house had looked like before making all of the improvements]

We had lived there for about twenty years, and then decided we wanted to stay. The girls were getting bigger.

Jennifer: Our neighbor is an artist and she painted this for us. It was the cutest little cabin, but we couldn't fit everything in it anymore. With our daughters and with space ... and anyways, we couldn't even build onto it, because it wasn't sturdy enough. Anyways, that's what it looked like.

Sophia: How many rooms do you have now after the remodel?

Dave: Four bedrooms, several bathrooms. It's three stories. Surgite (our house guest) gets the upper story, the "crows nest."

Jennifer: Yeah, that was one thing. When we built this we put in really big windows. Ahh, man, it makes such a big difference.

Dave: We kept a lot of things from the old cabin, like those french windows. The french windows came from the old shed. We took out all of the old flooring, and we used it around the windows and doors, like the one leading to the pantry. The floors are roughly around a hundred years old. Same with the steps upstairs. We used both of the doors – all three of the doors. We had three doors: two exterior doors and one interior door. The interior door was from the bathroom. That was the only door inside the house. So the girls have the bathroom door – it's a little skinny thing. And then the front door was this door to the pantry. And the other door in our bathroom upstairs. We kept all of the doors, a lot of the wood flooring, and some of the windows to use in this house. Reusing stuff – and all of the wood floors are reclaimed from a salvage company, and we had them refinished.

Jennifer: Our neighbors were the one's who built the house and a lot of the finish work. We have a lot of contractors and artists in the community – really handy folks. We hired the community.

Dave: Well, I am not a real craftsman, but I did the deck and all of the caulking and painting, and everything outside, and stuff like that. If I had built the house, everything would have fallen down.

Sophia: How was the community changed since you have been here?

Jennifer: I feel like it is better now than it has ever been – so many young families, lots of a little kids. When our girls were young we had only one other family with kids around the same age [on the beach]. We had two kids and they had two kids, so that was great and we were all friends. But now the beach has multiple families and friends, and they help each other out.

Dave: There are probably over twenty little kids under the age of ten – probably twenty-five. There are a lot more young couples. Because we have been here for thirty years, a lot has changed.

Sophia: What was it like before?

Dave: Well, just more folks who have been here for a real long time. And there were hardly any children. Not a lot of young people, except there has always been a good number of UPS (University of Puget Sound) kids who rent down here and stay – and then later bought houses of their own.

Jennifer: And they are the finest people here. They are just great. They are the younger families – really good people.

Dave: And it's just a little bit more civilized now. We didn't really have sewer water, we had to use well water instead.

Jennifer: Oh yeah, the sewer came in about 1990. So yeah, that was a big change. And even the paved road, that wasn't there.

Dave: And we only had half of the parking lot. We expanded it. And the stairs were completely different. They were pretty sketchy – a little bit more dangerous getting here and being here. It was pretty dangerous!

Jennifer: Well, the storms are the same. I feel a little bit safer now.

Dave: In winter storms you'll get a lot more debris. In the smaller cabin, the whole house would shake. The newer house is much more stable. In fact, when the washer was in spin cycle, the house would shake so much that you would feel like you were in an earthquake, too.

Jennifer: That's why we couldn't keep any of it.

Dave: There are a lot of cabins that are same. Some of them have the potential of getting water onto their deck and into their house during really bad storms.

Jennifer: You know, I guess there have been several houses that have been remodeled and rebuilt.

Dave: But they are making it really difficult – you can't get permits to add onto your house. The government keeps putting up more restrictions. But it is a really unique community we are within the city limits. But you still feel like you're far away from the city. You drop down from the stairs and you have

your own little community that's separate from up the hill. We are all pretty self-sufficient, and really independent. We do most things down here on our own.

Sophia: Do you ever feel more isolated down here than you would have if you lived above the hill?

Dave: Yeah it is totally isolating, which is good!

Jennifer: But in some ways I think we have much stronger community – we all know each other, unlike so many other neighborhoods.

Dave: I mean, I sell real estate, and a lot of times I'll sell a house for someone, and I'll ask how the neighbors are, and they will know the two houses next to them, and then maybe the one across the street. But they won't know anyone else on the block, and they have been there for ten or twenty years. But here, I know everyone in all 79 houses, with the exception to a few short-term renters. And it is just nice, you know? You'll just walk along and stop and talk to someone and find out you have a common history. And you share the environment.

Jennifer: There are community events for New Years and the Fourth of July.

Dave: Plus a celebration for Mount St. Helens, for blowing up.

Jennifer: Some square dancing, barn dancing – and for New Years, a few houses are opened up and everyone spends about 45 minutes in each. We are really only here for the boat races. We are usually with our families for the holidays. But people like to shoot off fireworks off of their decks.

Dave: Yeah, there aren't any real big firework shows. But it is a good spot to be. It feels more like we are pioneers instead of just civilized, up-the-hill people. And every time you tell someone you live on Salmon Beach, their eyes go wide and they say, "that's really cool!" It's definitely not like living in a normal neighborhood – it's quite unique.

Jennifer: But it definitely is not for everyone. Not everyone would want to climb up stairs every day.

Dave: It's not a convenient place to live. You have to want to be a little bit more hardy and independent. You can't just rush to the store for eggs in two minutes.

Jennifer: You just call the store next door [laughs].

Dave: I have gone to neighbors and said, "is the store open?" And they say, "what do you need Dave?" "Umm, a cup of flour, a cup of sugar, a couple of eggs." We just share back and forth. But it's a close knit community. So when something bad happens, like with a slide or a bad storm, we all help out and pitch in to put it back together. Most of the work that gets done is through work parties.

Jennifer: That's one thing about us, when we moved in. We became really close to three other couples. So we would meet up once a month and work, and then make a big dinner together. We got a lot accomplished. This went on for years.

Dave: If I needed help or a tool, I would go over to Chris's and rummage around his shop. It's open. We don't lock our doors. It's a good place to live, hopefully we will stay here for a long time. You never know what the future holds – there's a big world out there.

Sophia: Living here must get harder as you get older – especially with the stairs.

Dave: There are a lot of folks in their seventies who have lived here for 40 years. But it seems like they don't age.

Jennifer: They still look the same to me!

Dave: But but it's a good place, everyone knows the names of everyone's dogs and families.

Jennifer: There was a time when there was an earthquake and a big slide. And I became really paranoid. We started to look for houses up the hill. We never pursued it. But we were looking for one for a while – well, I was. And then what happens is after it was wet and cold or after a big earthquake or slide, spring comes around again, and really nice weather, and the threat of the hill is gone, and all the fear goes away.

Dave: Yeah, and summers here are ridiculous. You have sun here all day and everyone is just on their decks, barbecuing, working on their boats, fishing, or reading.

Jennifer: There is one family who lived in the north end – and they bought this house, but they rent out their house in the north end. Usually it is the opposite. Usually they use the houses down here for weekends, like our other neighbors do. But they are not here full time. It doesn't bother us – we feel like we have it great, because we have a lot more privacy.

Dave: Yeah, when we first started looking for a house, we were looking for either a view of the water or on the water. And I was just starting in real estate, and she was teaching, so she hardly had any money. But I was looking for a waterfront. It makes a lot of sense right!?

Jennifer: But we worked it out!

Dave: We looked all over – different lakes and the peninsula. But like she said earlier we just found this place in a little ad.

Jennifer: Just this simple little ad – “cozy cottage,” and we thought that we should check this out. But it has turned out to be a great place to raise our daughters. They used to miss grass when they were little, but as they got older they realized how neat it was down here, because they have so much freedom. We didn't need to worry so much as some do with smaller kids.

Dave: That's why we built onto our cottage so we could have their friends come here instead of going there. Because they shared a seven by eleven foot bedroom, with two twin beds and one dresser with no closet. The beds fit by half an inch, and that's how they lived.

Jennifer: I am not sure how we did it. But when each daughter would go their separate rooms, the rooms are stuffed. I guess the more space you have the more you fill it. It was really fun while it lasted in the smaller house.

Dave: It's nice to have more people come over and entertain. But I do miss the old cottage.