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By Wanda Kenton Smith

From the time he was a tyke tubing behind his grandfather's 55-foot houseboat, through combo skiing and carving on a big board as a teen, to surfing the waves in exotic oceans as an adult, Jim Emmons has had a lifelong love affair with the water.



In 1989, former college buddy John McEver of World Publications (later acquired by Bonnier) gave him an opportunity to match his water-borne passion with a promising career. Jim became an ad sales rep for *WaterSki* Magazine and a few short years later, co-founded *WakeBoarding* Magazine where he remained for 21 years, eventually becoming publisher of both water sports titles.

During his tenure, Jim took on key industry roles including serving four times as elected president of the Water Sports Industry Association and developing its ongoing signature leadership conference, Summit in the Snow. He also brought the water sports segment to Surf Expo and later created and launched the annual Wake Awards.

In the late 90s after learning about Coast Guard non-profit grant programs, he convinced the WSIA that it was simply smart business to work toward funding. In 2004, the Water Sports Foundation was registered as a 501(c)3.

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Over the next several years, Emmons, in partnership with then WSIA Executive Director Larry Meddock, worked tirelessly to learn the ins and outs about boating safety while forging important relationships with the Coast Guard and other industry safety stakeholders. In 2010, the WSF won its first contract of \$637,341. Shortly thereafter, Emmons shifted full-time focus into the executive director role and has spent the past 10 years passionately championing scores of boating safety media and marketing outreach programs, reaching nearly one billion, highly targeted impressions. He was also appointed to serve two terms on the Coast Guard's National Boating Safety Advisory Council and was tapped as its chairman in 2020.

Boating Industry caught up with Jim to talk about key issues and why he believes boating safety should be a priority for the entire recreational marine industry.

BI: What is the hottest topic/concern today in boating safety, in your opinion?

JE: There are two hot topics that rise to the top. First, nearly one out of every three boating deaths are human propelled. Of them, we have discovered with some cross-tabulation of the U.S. Coast Guard boating accident statistics, that nearly 75% of paddlers who died had less than 100 hours of experience. What is more alarming is that the figure drops to just below 45% of all paddlers that died who had less than 10 hours experience. This is concerning when you consider that paddlesports do not involve high rates of speed, carbon monoxide, flammable fluids, spinning propellers, or the chance for blunt force trauma due to a collision, yet nearly one-out-of-every-three boating deaths (27%) are human propelled. I believe we can – and should - do more to lower the overall boating deaths by focusing on the human propelled segment.

Secondly, during the pandemic, Info-Link confirmed there were 415,000 first-time registered boat owners in 2020 who joined our boating community. While this is great news on the sales front, we know many of these new boat owners did not participate in boating safety courses due to COVID mandates. So as an industry, we all need to be rallying to get these new boaters educated so they can operate safely. The good news is that live classes are resuming throughout the country and there is now a wealth of online courses and hybrid formats available. Ultimately, we need to better connect the dots at retail between sales and boater education.

BI: How can marine industry stakeholders better support the efforts of the WSF and other boating safety organizations?

JE: It starts with the belief that as industry members we must adopt higher standards for safety in both our own businesses and personal lives. Industry members must set the boating safety example. We all should constantly remind boaters to take a boating education course, to wear life jackets and to avoid impairment. Coast Guard reports documented that alcohol was the leading known contributing factor to boating accidents in 2019; and 79% of those that died, drowned... 86% did not wear life jackets.

BI: What would you like recreational marine industry leaders to better understand about the importance of boating safety and education?

JE: People don't think tragedy will happen to them so following simple safety protocols is often overlooked. When you have had the opportunity to interview dozens of people that were involved in an accident, especially if there was a death involved, you realize that being prepared and following safety recommendations is nothing to discount. I wish more people in our industry took a more serious attitude and more proactive approach toward promoting boating safety and education.

Manufacturers and some retailers are concerned that if they talk about safety, a potential buyer might consider boating unsafe and walk away from a sale. However, the truth is that negative publicity generated by untrained and inexperienced boaters involved in accidents and reported in the media has a much more detrimental outcome. We should all be working together and involved in promoting boater education.

BI: What tools does the WSF have available to help boating industry businesses better promote boating safety?

JE: The WSF has produced an enormous amount of boating safety content including more than 200 video PSA's on almost every imaginable which are available on our YouTube channel. We have a portable USB device that includes 77 U.S. Coast Guard approved videos PSA's, and more. This past spring, we launched our new www.watersportsfoundation.com website which includes a summary of our many Coast Guard projects and outreach programs. We simultaneously launched our exciting new national public relations campaign that is "the" PR campaign for all recreational boating safety. We designed and built a very comprehensive "National Boating Safety Media Resource Center" which includes a wealth of original and curated content provided by ourselves and multiple industry boating safety stakeholders. While it was conceived and designed for journalists and producers covering boating safety stories, many of our boating industry colleagues have downloaded a wealth of content including still photography, video and b-roll, social media posts, blogs, press materials and more to supplement their own boating safety programs and campaigns.

BI: What other projects are you most excited about today?

JE: I'm really thrilled by our early PR outreach results which have been wildly successful, generating hundreds of thousands of positive impressions in just a few short months. We have facilitated major interviews and stories in many newspapers and magazines including coverage in *Yahoo*, *USA Today*, *Men's Journal*, among others, as well as TV and radio interviews, blogs and podcast programs. We also very much appreciate the support of the recreational marine media who have supported our efforts by running stories and tips to keep readers educated and safe.

I'm also very excited about our project to reach big box, sporting goods and club stores where millions of kayaks and SUP's are presently sold, but have no instruction about carriage requirements or the importance of taking a paddler education course.

WSF is a member of the NASBLA paddlesports committee and through our industry connections, we've invited the world's largest life jacket producer, Kent Watersports Absolute Outdoor division, to help connect us with these retailers to share the importance of life jackets and paddler education. We've printed 6.9 million copies of a

custom safety pamphlet, *Be Smart, Be Safe, Have Fun*, which was vetted by dozens of industry stakeholders. WSF was able to get the pamphlet placed with the world's top recreational kayak manufacturers inside the product's ownership packet.

BI: As you consider your 32-year industry career, what do you value the most?

JE: I've been blessed to work with some of the best people in the world. Knowing that each day's work is one step closer to saving a life and saving a family from the tragedy of loss is without a doubt, the most rewarding.

BI: Any life mantras or quotes that you live by?

JE: I have several. "Live hard, play hard." "Help others; be compassionate and understanding." "The greatest gift you can give someone is your time, because when you give your time, you are giving a portion of your life that you will never get back." And the last one is especially meaningful because it captures how I feel about collaborating, creating positive synergies and working with other stakeholders throughout the industry to collectively accomplish important boating safety goals: "Together, we accomplish more than anyone alone."