

# The Spinal Column

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## 1 minute interview with Captain Luke Clyburn

By *Spinal Column Staff* on March 23, 2022

BY CINDY MUROFF  
STAFF WRITER  
cindy@scnmail.com



*Captain Luke Clyburn is the commanding officer of the Great Lakes Division of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps in White Lake. He is pictured inside his home with his two parrots, Henry Hudson, a Scarlet McCaw, and an African Gray named Sir Francis Drake. (Photos courtesy of Jessica Katharsys)*

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Great Lakes Division of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps in White Lake. The program is operated under the watchful eye of commanding officer Captain Luke Clyburn, a scuba diver, underwater filmmaker/photographer and a finance banker. And, yes, he is a licensed captain and has the parrots to prove it: Henry Hudson, a Scarlet McCaw, and an African Gray named Sir Francis Drake.

Captain Luke recently spoke with *The Spinal Column* about a 6,000-year-old tree stump, how he has gone around the world four-and-a-half times, and the undiscovered history of the great lakes.

### ***How does one transition from a financial banker to sea captain?***

*"I did not plan on being a captain, but banking didn't give me the time for my passion, which is working on the lakes. I have been running a real estate appraisal company in White Lake for*

*the past 40 years, Clyburn Appraisal Services. Being in business for myself gave me the flexibility and funding to work Monday through Thursday and be on the water Friday through Sunday. I have a strong feeling about the Great Lakes and the history of this part of the world. It's all under the water. My dad and sister were both in the Navy. A friend of mine pushed me into getting my captain license in 1977 through the Merchant Marines. I needed a license to operate a ship and perform sea cadet training."*

***So, how did you get involved with the sea cadet program?***

*"I grew up in southern Indiana on the banks of the Ohio River in a town called Evansville. At the age of 16, I went to work on a river boat. I became interested in the Great Lakes and fresh water. I actually attended college in Michigan because of the Great Lakes, earning my business degree from the Detroit College of Business and my master's degree in business from Central Michigan University. While I was attending college in Detroit, I started working for First Federal Saving and Loan in Pontiac. The president of the company was a boater. We became friends. He was former military who knew about the sea cadet program, whose purpose is to develop a maritime interest with American youth. Working at the bank, I thought it would help my career if I got involved with the program. Business people in White Lake, Waterford and Pontiac decided to put together a White Lake Township chapter. In 1977, we got our first ship from the Navy. The 75- foot wooden ship was going to be scrapped, it had holes in the portside. We had to completely rebuild it. That ship became the Noble Odyssey because one of our first research programs involved studying ships that lost crew members."*

***How important is scuba diving to the sea cadet program?***

*"Scuba diving actually started my whole journey. In fact, if it had not been for scuba diving I would probably be climbing mountains. At the sea cadet program, diving is not just something to do, but rather, we use that equipment as a tool to go under water and look at things no one else has seen."*

***Please tell us about some of the sea cadet research projects you have experienced.***

*"You need a purpose to be on the water. In 1981, we put together film for PBS of a shipwreck off of Lake Superior. We have worked with Cranbrook to study Michigan's islands, original plant species on those islands and threats to our plants. We have worked with Oakland University (OU) to see how zebra mussels impact clams at the bottom of Lake St. Clair. We also worked with OU to study ancient shorelines. This research led to the discovery of rooted tree stumps two miles offshore that were carbon dated to be 6,000 years old. We have worked with the State of Michigan in Port Huron to recover wreckage from the Tuskegee Airmen. In the last 300 years, there have been 6,000 shipwrecks on the bottom of the Great Lakes. The copper industry ran for 5,000 years on the Keweenaw Peninsula. Where did all the copper go? There has to be wreckage. If I could find 6,000-year-old tree stumps, we can find pieces of wreckage and that is work we are doing with the University of Wisconsin. We have studied Traverse Bay and the Straits of Mackinac. And, this summer we will work with Macomb County*

*to study underwater ground areas of a cemetery and an ancient village with the goal of bringing out the history of that period of time. We go where the need is. And in the last 50 years, we have put on enough mileage to go around the earth four and a half times."*

***What is the goal of the sea cadet program?***

*"Scouting had been America's main youth program, but in 1962, Congress created the sea cadet program. The goal is to study what lies under the water and help develop a passion for these young people, ages 10-18, to join the Coast Guard, Navy or Merchant Marines. And we have the only ship in the U.S. that is used fulltime to train kids from all over the world. This is the Pride of Michigan, which we got from the Navy. We didn't give it that name because it's a great boat. We gave it that name because the kids we teach are the pride of the Michigan. They are the ones operating the vessel."*

*"In addition, we train the kids for underwater exploration. Earlier this month, our cadets competed in the SeaPerch Underwater Robotics competition at the University of Michigan. SeaPerch teaches students to build underwater Remotely Operated Vehicles. Cadets run the robots under the water. This will be great training for our Lake St. Clair project."*

***What kind of support does it take to operate the program?***

*"Well, first, everyone is a volunteer. We have no hidden payroll. Everything we have goes into maintaining the ship, which costs about \$125,000 per year. I used to wake up in the middle of the night wondering where we would get the funding. Over the years, we have received grants to keep us going. And, the Kowall family has helped us find ways to raise money. I would not be here today if not for them."*

*"Second, both White Lake and Harrison townships have been big supporters of ours. Our homebase is the Dublin Center. We meet the first and third Saturday of each month. We train at Dublin through April. And Harrison Township has provided dockage for us since 1980. We take the boat out from April through October."*

***What do you see for the next 50 years of the Great Lakes Division of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps in White Lake?***

*"Well, as for me, next year, I will become the grand president of the Great Lakes Region of the International Ship Masters' Association. This is a real honor for me. As far as the sea cadet program, the Great Lakes are not like they were in the time of glaciers. Where all this will lead, I don't know. But I'd like to do more research and bring in more kids to keep us moving forward."*

For more information about the Great Lakes Division of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps visit [www.greatlakesdivision.org/](http://www.greatlakesdivision.org/)