Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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# Port Washington dive team pioneer Joe Weiss turned an avocation into a business and spends a good part of his underwater time dealing with the quagga and zebra mussels that threaten the city's water supply

On Sept. 26, the Port Washington dive team and the Ozaukee County rescue boat crew used heroic measures to rescue two fishermen stranded at the Port Washington lighthouse during a raging Lake Michigan storm.

Joe Weiss with a handful of quagga mussels. Photo by Sam Arendt

Although he didn't participate in that rescue — the battery died on his pager so he didn't get the call — Joe Weiss of Port Washington was one of three men who formed the dive team in 1981 and is the only founder who's still a member. Dive team members Mike Jajtner and Roland Khaloupka joined six months later.

Weiss was only 8 years old when he decided the city needed a dive team.

"I went to the lakefront with my dad. There was a car that went into the lake and I remember the firefighters trying to find the car with poles," Weiss said. "I thought, 'There needs to be a dive team.'"

Eleven years later, in December 1980, he and two fellow firefighters convinced then fire chief Neil Noesen to form a dive team.

Weiss grew up watching Jacques Cousteau documentaries and was always attracted to the water.

“I really felt I knew how to do it already from watching Jacques Cousteau and all the adventures that had divers in them. It felt pretty comfortable,” Weiss said of his initial lessons.

The three men spent 1981 training together and earning diving certifications. They used their own equipment and still do, Weiss said.

Weiss soon became as comfortable under the water as on land, so it’s not surprising he took his diving skills a step further.

Weiss, a maintenance supervisor at Columbia St. Mary’s Ozaukee Hospital in Mequon, developed his own business, Liquid Assets Diving Ltd. Using an array of diving and photography equipment, including sonar and digital video cameras, Weiss can find just about anything in a lake and has been hired for some unusual jobs.

He found an airplane that went down 110 feet in Lake Michigan after attending an Experimental Aircraft Association convention in Oshkosh six or seven years ago, a personal watercraft that recently sank in Random Lake and a hearing aid that fell into the Port harbor.

He’s welded pipes underwater and cut off submerged steel shafts on old piers.

Weiss may dive into water that’s crystal clear or so murky he can’t see his hand in front of his face. He dove in water tanks on the roof and the 11th floor of the 16-story First Wisconsin building in downtown Milwaukee. Weiss cleared the tanks, which are used for the building’s water suppression system, of rust and other sediment that could clog water sprinklers.

Much of his work involves ridding municipal water-intake pipes and sewage filtration systems of invasive zebra and quagga mussels that started causing problems in state lakes in 1991.

The City of Port Washington is his best client and the reason he started his business.

“The Ozaukee Press had an article that Port was hiring a firm for $5,000 to remove the grates from the water intake pipe,” Weiss said. “My jaw dropped, thinking that’s ridiculous. Then I read the diving company said it was a larger job than they thought and they needed another $3,000 to complete the job.”

That night, Mike Wellenstein, a fellow diver, told Weiss he was going to ask Dave Ewig, water superintendent, if they could do the job instead.

“A couple days later, Mike called and said we got the job,” Weiss said. “Mike stayed on the surface. Dave came in the boat with us. I’m on the bottom for about 15 minutes and came up with both grates.”

Neither diver wanted money for their efforts, but Weiss told Ewig he wanted the opportunity to

do other diving jobs for the city.

Two weeks later, he read the city was hiring a dive team to map a route for a new chlorination line to rid the mussels from the intake pipes.

“I rolled up the Press and literally hit Dave with it,” Weiss said. “He asked if I could do something like that and I said, ‘Yes’ not knowing if I could. But if I can think of it, I can figure a way to do it.”

Weiss picked up a bid application form, bought the equipment he needed, including an 8-mm underwater camera. He made several practice dives and videos before submitting his bid, which was $1,300 less than the next-lowest bidder.

“I put a lot of thought into it. They wanted measurements and when you’re diving you sometimes only see small pieces at a time, so I marked where I was,” Weiss said. “I did the entire job without being paid for it and submitted a portion of the video as part of the proposal saying, ‘If you hire me, this is what you will get, this is the quality.’

“I was bidding against Chicago and Michigan companies, and they hired me. I lost money, but I was told by the engineering firm it was the best video and presentation they had for a chlorination project and it made their job much easier.”

He’s done almost every Port job since, including annual inspections of the chlorination system required by the state. He cleans off any remaining mussels and debris with a power washer.

“I have the advantage that I live here,” Weiss said. “I don’t have to pay for a team to sit in a hotel if it’s bad weather.

“I still do some things free for the city.”

Weiss is familiar with the area from  practicing with the dive team and making recreational dives to almost every documented shipwreck in Lake Michigan, including some shortly after they were found.

“Butch (Allen Klopp, a well-known local diver) and I became best buddies, and I learned a lot from him,” Weiss said. “Even with GPS (global positioning system), I still use the landmarks Butch showed me.”

Weiss is a meticulous diver who tries to leave nothing to chance, yet he knows there are always unseen variables.

“For every one hour of diving, I probably think about it for 10 hours,” he said.

“Sometimes, we choreograph it and videotape it because you only have so many minutes down there. I’ve even made models of doors that have to be opened. Once you’re down there, you can’t talk easily, so the guy on top has to be able to read my mind.”

The water filtration pipes were installed in 1948 and Weiss has made several repairs. Last year, he put 20,000 pounds of stones around the pipes to stabilize them as original blueprints showed.

With his sonar camera, Weiss discovered intake pipes from 1912 that were used before the city system was installed. If a fish got through the holes, it ended up in the water system, he said.

Weiss was a scuba instructor. He taught both his children to dive, but he no longer teaches.

“If I have somebody else on the bottom, I’m like a mother hen. I can’t stand it. I’m a worry wort, but when I’m down there, I don’t worry,” he said. “I would say 90% of the time I’m in the water, I’m down there by myself with someone on top.

“I always do a little prayer before I go down, and I’m always happy to see the light when I come up.”