



The  
**VOYAGE**  
**BACK**

**After five years traveling throughout the world by sailboat, attorney Jeffrey Brooke returned to his Minneapolis-based firm. Why did he come back? And could he fit back in?**

— by David Hechler —

n 1999, Jeffrey Brooke was 55 years old and appeared to have it all.

He was happily married to his childhood sweetheart from Albert Lea. He was a successful lawyer and founding partner of Bowman and Brooke, a thriving Minneapolis law firm with offices in four other cities specializing in litigation, particularly product liability defense. As he puts it, "I was at the top of my game."

But still, he wanted out, to step off the treadmill. He and his wife dreamed of going sailing—and they weren't talking about a Royal Caribbean cruise. They wanted to take off for a year on the high seas.

The timing seemed right. Bowman and Brooke had a national practice defending car manufacturers such as General Motors, Ford, and Honda against product liability claims in courts around the country. The top attorneys—and Brooke was one of them—were constantly on the road trying cases. Even though Ann had her own career as a school psychologist, Brooke recognized the hardship his absence imposed on her. Now that their two sons were grown, it was time to break the cycle.

There was also another factor. In the mid-1990s, two close friends who also defended product liability lawsuits died suddenly—one from a heart attack and the other from cancer. He and Ann knew about the physical demands of sailing. "If we wait too long," Ann told her husband, "we may not have the health to do it."

Brooke told Richard Bowman, the managing partner of the firm's Minneapolis office, that he wanted an unpaid sabbatical. When they started the firm, Brooke had agreed to open an office in Phoenix. He was still the managing partner there in 1999, when he was ready for a break. Though Bowman wondered how he would get along without his mainstay—"He was the one person I discussed everything with," Bowman says—by then the firm was home to 70 lawyers. They could survive without Brooke.

So Jeff and Ann set off on their 51-foot yacht, *High Drama*. At the end of a year, they hadn't had enough. Brooke contacted the firm and warned that he might extend his absence. And he did. He took another year. Then another. Then two more.

Finally, after five-and-a-half years, Brooke was ready to return. But now he wondered whether they wanted him back. He called Bowman. Early on, Bowman had assured the others that Brooke would be back. But at some point around the third or fourth year, he lost faith. So the call was a real surprise. Bowman told Brooke to fly back, and they'd talk it over.

They talked for hours over three or four days. Brooke asked his partner to canvass the firm and find out how the other attorneys felt. Bowman wondered whether his old compadre really wanted to do this—or just needed the money. In the end, they each retained hopes and doubts, and they agreed to give it a try.

In some ways, the voyage back has been at least as challenging as the one that preceded it. The path from adventure to business hasn't been as dramatic as some of the storms Brooke endured at sea, but it's harbored twists and surprises of its own. And the voyage isn't over.

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met Jeff and Ann last December. I'd heard about their adventure, and I knew they were planning a visit to Manhattan (where I work), so we agreed to meet for dinner. Jeff had visited his old mates in Minneapolis and Phoenix, but he hadn't officially returned. That was still a couple of weeks off.

We're seated at the back table of a nondescript Asian restaurant whose chief appeal is that it's relatively uncrowded, so we can talk for hours without being disturbed. Brooke is a big man—he played offensive guard and was captain of the football team at Northwestern University. (The Albert Lea High School grad always thought it would be the University of Minnesota, but after recruiting Brooke for three years, the coach didn't offer him a scholarship.)

**High Drama was the culmination of the couple's long love affair with sailing—a passion that brought the two together back in Albert Lea.**



He still looks powerful, but there's nothing macho about the 60-year-old lawyer with the gray hair, salt-and-pepper beard, and ready laugh—frequently aimed at himself. He's dressed casually, his blue button-down shirt is open at the neck. Ann, who wears her white hair short, is wearing a red suede jacket with a Native American design.

They began sailing when they were still kids in Albert Lea—in fact, it had brought them together as a couple. Of course, they had to wait a few years before they could fully indulge their love of sailing. Ann went to Oberlin College for two years, then transferred to the University of Minnesota. After Jeff finished college, he returned in the summer of 1966 to attend the University of Minnesota Law School. That was where he met Dick Bowman, who was an adjunct professor in one of his courses.

Just before law school began, Jeff and Ann were married. A few years later, after the couple had settled into their careers, they went off for a weekend in search of a little adventure. They'd thought about sailing at Lake Pepin on the Mississippi and, on a lark, pretended they were interested in a boat that was for sale there. Much to their amazement, they bought it.

By the time they were talking about a much bigger adventure, they'd sailed quite a bit, but only Ann had ventured out onto the ocean—and even then she was hugging the shore on a coastal passage. What they were about to embark on was several orders of magnitude beyond that. But they were smart about it. They didn't set goals that would create unnecessary pressure. They started in San Diego and, rather than aim for the South Seas, headed for Mexico. Their only resolution, Ann explains, was to sail “until it's either not fun anymore or we don't like each other or we're just tired of it.”

They eventually sailed all over the world, but they planned day to day, anchorage to anchorage, from one hurricane season to the next. The ultimate goal was to make sure they weren't in hurricane areas when the hurricanes were. Yet even untethered from the demands of his lawyer life, Jeff did not find perfect freedom. “When you sail,” he observes, “it's not the judges who control your time; it's the weather that controls your time.”

They spent five-plus years on *High Drama*, but the highlights that Ann mentions are mostly undramatic. The joy of arriving at a remote village on an island near Papua New Guinea, for example, not as tourists but as members (albeit temporary ones) of a community of people they'd only read about—and with whom they would seem to have little in common. Yet soon enough, they were going to the market and buying fruits and vegetables—or trading them in

exchange for batteries and fishhooks. You learn to trust people who know what you don't, Ann says, like where to anchor your boat. And sometimes you meet people who desperately need what you have. There was the fisherman who had a truck but no gas to get his fish to market. They gave him gasoline; in exchange, he gave them a piece of sandalwood, a highly valued commodity on his island.

Ann remembers swimming off Hunga Island in Tonga with a humpback whale and her two-day-old calf, puckered and white. And she recalls sitting on the boat anchored near the equator, which afforded them the rare opportunity of simultaneously observing both the Big Dipper and the Southern Cross, the most widely recognized constellations in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. “It's so peaceful,” she says.

worst part of high winds is the sound—the howl,” he says. Ann nods. You can see in their faces how vivid the memory is. The waves were getting shorter and rolling, crashing into the side and sending water over the decks. Not white water or foam, which isn't so bad, but green—“serious water,” Jeff says. Waves this size “would not be powerful enough to roll our boat, I was confident.” He pauses. “Pretty confident.”

As it turned out, their confidence was justified. That was the worst of it, and it wasn't so very bad. It certainly did nothing to deter them from continuing on to new adventures. So why did they come back?

“I want to go back to work,” Jeff says without hesitation. “I've been sure of that since New Zealand, which was at the end of 2001.” They were there to avoid the tropical storms, and they



“When you sail, it's not the judge who controls your time,” Brooke says, “it's the weather.”

Though not always. Jeff tells about the day they were sailing out of New Zealand, heading for Tonga. Ann was on watch at sunrise. When Jeff awakened to take his turn, she exulted over the red sky she'd seen. “I want to change our schedule, so that you can see it,” she told him. Neither recalled the adage: “Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.”

The wind built all that day. They pointed 50 degrees into the teeth of it, not to sail but to keep stable. Later it was blowing 50 to 60 knots, Jeff says. They hauled down the sail, afraid it would be ripped to shreds during the night. It took both of them to accomplish this task. The waves were 25 to 28 feet, and building. “The

toured the country while they waited for the bad-weather season to end. He actually liked having a break from the boat, but it was longer than he wished, he says. In fact, he adds, it made him a little crazy. It made him realize that he didn't want to retire and simply sit around.

“Retiring and doing nothing would drive me nuts,” he says. He also believes that he owes something to the firm's younger lawyers. “Ann and I have been permitted to live the dream of our life for five years,” Brooke says. Now it was time for pay some debts to the lucrative profession that had made the dream possible.

There was another force that pulled the Brookes homeward, something they discovered in themselves after September 11.

Their immediate reaction after they heard radio accounts of the terrorist attacks "was wanting to be together with other Americans," Jeff recalls. "There's a feeling of guilt: 'We shouldn't be here; we should be home doing something.'" A short time later, in Tonga, "People would come up and touch us," Ann remembers. "And they would say, 'We are so sorry.'" Later, during the 2004 presidential campaign, Jeff spent a lot of time listening to coverage on their satellite radio. As he got caught up in the issues, again he felt his spirit drawn home.

And now that they're back? "We're having culture shock," he says.

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Jeff spent time last November and December in the office, getting acquainted and reacquainted. During his absence, the firm had doubled in size. Its 70 lawyers grew to 150 located in six offices (it had added one) across the United States. Brooke is getting to know partners he's only just met. Some associates he hired are now star litigators.

Five years ago, the firm was talking about diversity, but it hadn't done much. At that time, 20 percent of its lawyers, and 14 percent of its partners, were women. Now, it's 40 percent and 20 percent, respectively. Another 19 percent of its lawyers are minorities—up from 12 percent.

"When I left," he says, "blackberries were things you put on ice cream." The managing partners were trying to decide whether all the lawyers needed access to the Internet. Now they all have the other kind of BlackBerry, and they're all connected 24/7.

He's still unsure of what his actual role at the firm will be. He doesn't think he'll try any cases his first year back, he says. He thinks he might make the greatest contribution by helping with firm management and advising young lawyers who might benefit from the counsel of a "gray-hair."

"On a personal level," he says, "I've now worn wingtip shoes three days in a row after wearing flip flops" for most of five years. "I don't like it. I have some adjustments to make."

So, in some surprising ways, do his colleagues.

"I kind of hoped he wouldn't come back," says Will Auther, a younger partner in Phoenix who admires Brooke's pioneering spirit. He felt disappointed, he explains, because Brooke's return meant that Auther had lost a role model that the escaped partner represented. "I would like to follow his example to some degree," the lawyer says. Not by going sailing, necessarily, but by doing something to step out of the routine.

Doug Wilson understands why Brooke left: He was on the verge of burning out. Wilson is

assistant general counsel of Kawasaki, one of Brooke's clients. Brooke, he notes, had been "running wide open for a long time." Sailing was a natural escape, says Wilson, who has known Brooke for the 20 years his law firm has existed and has also sailed with him several times.

Wilson had dinner with Brooke not long after his return, and they talked it over. Technological advances and the speed of communication "have changed the world and the way we all operate," Wilson says. "He will have to get used to that. Other than that, it won't be hard for him."

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Brooke has the skill to try a case tomorrow, he says. "The question is, when will he feel comfortable?"

Brooke's absence undoubtedly affected firm leader Dick Bowman more than anyone. "It's like if someone told you in 10 minutes you're going to sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the Super Bowl." Just as he got used to the idea, he says, Brooke left.

"I remember the loneliness for the next year," Bowman adds. He'd lost his friend and confidant. He admired his partner's courage—in every sense—and was glad for him, but it was also hard, he acknowledges. As for the return, he'd honestly given up hope. Then, he wondered what kind of person would show up: one enthusiastic about resuming his career, or one resigned to the necessity of it? Did he retain an abiding desire to work, or did he just need the money?

It didn't take long to get an answer. "It's been fun to see his confidence return at a marvelous rate," Bowman says. And Brooke's been universally accepted by his partners, he adds. "I think we'll see him back in court before the summer's out. And that will be of his own doing. He can do whatever he wants."

The man himself doesn't sound nearly so confident. His progress is uneven, and he often expresses ambivalence. But there are also bursts of enthusiasm.

Last January, Brooke sends me an e-mail: "I attended several meetings of partners in Phoenix and had to sit on my hands to resist the urge to take charge. Of course, they have done just fine without me, but I am pretty used to being captain of meetings here in Phoenix. Like riding a bike, I guess."

He's surprised by the way he's been treated. New partners and old have gone out of their way to welcome him. Nonetheless, "I still feel rusty," he complains during a recent phone call.

"High profile trials are a young man's game. I'm just not sure whether I want to step back into a high-stakes situation." But a minute later he adds: "It's still exciting. It's still an adrenaline rush just to hear about the trials that our firm is doing. And it's inviting."

A long e-mail in February details the range of emotions—both ups and downs. He writes about a firm party at which he was asked to speak. After reminiscing about the "good old days," he began thanking his colleagues for the warm reception. "As I spoke," he said, "tears

started to form in my eyes." He quickly handed back the microphone and fled.

"I have started in earnest doing some work for clients," he continues a few paragraphs later. "Although there is some rust on the procedural matters, I have surprised a few younger attorneys with my recall of the rules."

"Judgment is still what the practice of law ultimately turns on, and surprisingly I don't feel rusty on that. Indeed, the twin fundamentals of preparation and judgment worked well for me trying cases and then while sailing around the world. I am not about to start winging it or getting by on good looks at this stage."

He ends by recounting a basketball game he and Ann attended, describing another quiet moment that goes to the heart of his experience. As they stood and listened to the singing of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, he writes, "for the second time in a month I was caught totally off guard emotionally. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I looked at Ann and saw the same."

"Some aspects of coming home," he concludes, "are hard to put your finger on."

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*Postscript:* The Brookes took one final cruise last summer, around the Mediterranean. In August, Jeff strained his back hoisting a couple of fouled anchors. That helped both decide to close the sailing chapter of their lives.

Brooke reports that he's happy to be back at work, and has established training and mentoring programs at his firm's six offices. Is he ready to climb back into the courtroom? "I still haven't signed up for that," he admits, although I am edging closer. ■

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