

“As Spiders Do” – UR Alumni Podcast

Cruising through Life at 5 mph with Becca Guillote, ‘07

Episode 4

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[intro music]

Maggie Johnson:

Welcome to “As Spiders Do,” the University of Richmond podcast where we share stories about our amazing alumni. I’m your host Maggie Johnson from the class of 2018. Today I’m talking with Becca Guillote, class of 2007, master captain and self-described spunky storyteller. We’ll discuss everything from living in Africa to breaking the fiberglass ceiling in sailing, including what it’s like to live full time on a sailboat. So, set sail with us into this episode of As Spiders Do.

[intro music fades out]

Maggie Johnson:

I’m so excited to have you here, Becca. Thank you so much for hopping on with me today. So really just to start, would love—hearing a little bit about your experience at UR—what did you major in? What was your experience? What did you love about the University of Richmond?

Becca Guillote:

Let’s see, I graduated in 07, so I started there in 03, and I declared my major on the last day that we were provided to declare a major, so the very end of my second year. So, just took a huge broad range of classes the first two years. And always gravitated towards the music department. I played piano all through middle and high school and continued to play piano for fun, but picked up harp lessons actually when I got to U of R. I’m not actually totally sure why, but I had a whole lot of fun playing the harp and just really liked the music classes that I was taking, so. But I’m not a performer and I never have liked performing. And so, my second year...It was the first time they were offering sort of a new major within the music department, which was ethnomusicology. And that kind of combined a handful of things that I loved, which was: music, writing, and international culture. I ended up majoring in ethnomusicology, which I loved. I took some phenomenal classes and it was really interesting, you know, I was part of a capoeira group and just kind of, you know, lots of different sorts of cultural music experiences. That was great. I think that the theme you’ll hear throughout sort of my story post university is travel. A lot of what I have done has been—has revolved around being international. And so, I think the combination of...of having that sort of very strange major that nobody’s ever heard of available to me, especially at such a small university and the strong encouragement to take part in the study abroad program at the university, I think that really kind of shaped where I headed after that.

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Maggie Johnson:

Excellent. Where did you study abroad?

Becca Guillote:

I did a summer session in Italy. I was taking Italian in college and so did an intensive in Italy for the summer and then rolled over to Melbourne in Australia for the fall semester and just absolutely loved it.

Maggie Johnson:

Are there any experiences from going abroad for that long? I guess in a row over that many months, what lessons did you learn from that experience?

Becca Guillote:

You know, it was really the... I had traveled a bit with my family before that, but that was really the first time that I had traveled internationally by myself. And so, I think that, you know, there's everything from understanding the forms that I needed to fill out and there was nobody holding my hand through all of that. So, you have to figure out how to make your own way and make sure that you've got your ducks in a row and you have your passport and your visa and all the paperwork that you need. And so that was certainly a learning experience for me. I kept kind of looking around like, who's going to do this for me? And then just being over there, yeah, I ended up away from the States for seven months. And, you know, it took a bit of time to travel around Western Europe and then took a bit of time to travel to New Zealand. And so just had great experiences seeing the world by myself. And so, it was really confidence building, made plenty of mistakes. I almost missed my flight from Rome to Melbourne because I had the date wrong. You know, it was one of these, I flew at like 12:30 AM and so I had put it on the whole next day. And I was on a train in Germany and I needed to get back to Rome in like, you know, a number of hours. Plenty of that kind of learning experience that, you know, you learn to pay attention to the details. And again, nobody else is holding your hand. Yeah. It was a, it was a, it was a great, great experience. Really fortunate that I was able to do that and that the university, you know, really supports its students going abroad.

Maggie Johnson:

That's awesome. You already mentioned, but it did seem to spark a lifelong love of travel and so, where did you end up after graduation?

Becca Guillote:

You know, there’s not a really clear direct career path coming out of ethnomusicology. It’s a bit off the track there. So, I graduated sort of still not knowing what I wanted to be when I grew up. And so, I, you know, I kind of looked back over my years at U of R before, and thought about what experiences really impacted me the most and all of them were about travel. And so, I ended up moving to Ghana for a year right after graduating and, um, just doing some volunteering and also just sort of some self-exploration and being out on my own now in very much a third world country and for an extended period. My goal was to be in a place long enough that I felt like I really lived there, not just traveled through or visited. And I did, I was in one community, very small town, everybody knew me. There’s no way to totally fit in, but everybody knew me to the point that I felt like I was really part of the community when I was over there. So that was an incredible experience and certainly, sort of a lifelong, you know, bucket list dream for a lot of people. So, I was really, really glad I got to do that.

Maggie Johnson:

You mentioned it’s hard to kind of blend in, in that type of situation. Were there any particular challenges or anything that sticks out in your mind? I guess a specific instance or person that just really impacted that experience, either, you know, helping you feel like you fit in or alternatively?

Becca Guillote:

So many. I developed a great community of friends in the village where I live. But what really impacted me was the gaggle of kids that lived in the huts around where I lived. And they were always kind of, you know, from age three to age 14, they were all just clumped together and running around wild and they’d come hang out with us. And they loved it when, you know, we would take their picture and then they’d come look on the computer screen and see their faces. And I lived in a village that was surrounded by a protected forest that had monkeys in it as an ecotourism site. You know, we would sit together on the porch with the kids and watch the monkeys. And they would try to teach me some of their local language. And we would work on numbers and letters and using sticks, drawing in the dirt. And so, like that, kids don’t really care about where you’re from or who you are, what your background is. They just kind of accept you as a person. And so, I had so much fun with that crew, but all over the place, I ended up traveling all over Ghana by myself. I felt really safe and secure doing that. It was a wonderful, the culture in Ghana tends to be very proud of being Ghanaian. You know, I talked to so many people who had gone away to Europe or to the United States to study and they’d come back to Ghana because they just love their home

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country so much and they're so proud to be Ghanaian. And so that was insightful for me. I, at the time, um, under our presidency at the time was not always proud to be American. And so, it was really impactful for me to see the Ghanaians and how proud they were of their place. So, it was, it was cool.

Maggie Johnson:

That's fabulous. And so then after Ghana, you came back to Seattle. Were you from Seattle originally, or was that another?

Becca Guillote:

No, no, I was, I was from Richmond. Yeah, no, I was from Richmond. So, I came back to Richmond first. My sister got married that summer and then I, well, I knew that I didn't want to keep Richmond as my home base. I wanted to explore sort of a new home base and my boyfriend at the time did as well. And so, I had just gotten back from Ghana and I talked to my mom and I went out to lunch with my mom and I said, I'm going to move to Seattle with my boyfriend and his dog. And she just said, but you just got home. Sorry. So, jumped in the truck and wandered our way out to Seattle. I'm now married to said boyfriend, and we were expecting our first baby in a couple months. That all worked out quite well, but no, we just, uh, we wanted to kind of, again, just experience new places. We wanted to see what West coast life is all about and live on the water. We just kind of, we jumped in. It was an interesting time to move. It was 2008 and we didn't have, you know, jobs aligned or anything like that before we left. We kind of wandered across the country for six weeks in a truck and got to Seattle right as the market crashed in 2008. So it was a tough time to be in a new city where we didn't know anybody, didn't have jobs, didn't have housing, didn't have any money, but we figured it out.

Maggie Johnson:

It kind of strikes me, I feel like a lot of our most recent graduates are hitting the world in a similar situation.

Becca Guillote:

Yeah, it's a weird time.

Maggie Johnson:

Do you have any advice or words of wisdom that we could maybe share?



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Becca Guillote:

Stick with it, pursue it, whatever it is that you want to do. It took us a lot longer to get our feet under us than we had anticipated in getting here, but we knew one couple when we moved to Seattle. And so, we crashed on their couch for what was supposed to be like a week or two. It ended up being two months before we could find jobs in housing. And we just stuck with it. We just kept applying and we got the system down to try to find a rental house because we'd had so many swiped out from under us. And so, you know, we had, we were literally refreshing Craigslist, like getting to the bottom of the page and refreshing it to see what had just popped up. We'd drive straight there, with checkbook in hand, and if it was right, you know, we were just like right there on the front on the front step. And so, it just takes some, it takes some perseverance, but you can find what you're looking for. It's just not going to get handed to you.

Maggie Johnson:

I appreciate that. I have a brother who just graduated in the pandemic and he's kind of in that mode of just constantly applying constantly for, and looking for work. So, I'm sure there's lots of people in the thing.

Becca Guillote:

Yeah, absolutely. And we didn't get our dream jobs, right? I was working three different sales jobs. My husband kind of fell back into the career industry he didn't want to be in because that's where he had experience. And so, we knew, it was far from ideal. I was making minimum wage, but we found enough to kind of put it together and found our community of people and started just sort of establishing ourselves there. And that slowly sort of led to the jobs that we actually wanted to have and the places we actually wanted to be. So, you know, sometimes you just have to get it done for a while. So, it worked out, but it did, it took a lot longer than we had expected, that was part of the journey.

Maggie Johnson:

The thing of which, after that, you moved out on a sailboat. What was that like?

Becca Guillote:

Neither my husband or I had any sailing experience when we got out here, but an interest in learning. And so, we started out racing, got invited onto a race boat, had no idea what we were doing. It turns out neither did the owner of that boat. And we had a great, fun summer where we lost every single race. Sometimes like the committee boat had already gone to the bar. We were still out on the water trying to get back. It was a great learning experience. And

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then kind of sort of graduated to bigger and more competitive boats and raced pretty competitively for a couple of years. And along the way, met these people who were racing, who also had backgrounds in cruising or living on boats. And it was one of those where I was like, I didn't even know that was a thing. I didn't even know people lived on boats. All of a sudden, we found ourselves on the market for one. We wanted to own a home. We'd been living in a house full of roommates for a couple of years, which is really fun. And then it's not really anymore. You want to run space a little bit. So, but certainly could not afford a house in Seattle even in 2009 or 2010, whenever this was. So, uh, found ourselves looking for boats and, um, had a huge support network in our racing community of people helping us to figure out what kind of boat we were looking for. Because we had no idea. And yeah, eventually bought a, a Valiant 40, an old 40-foot cruising boat and, uh, it immediately moved aboard. I mean, within a week we were moving our stuff aboard and just kind of figured out the rest. You know, we knew how to sail. We knew how to put up the sails and make the boat go fast, but we had no idea how to fix or maintain a boat. We didn't know how to navigate anchor and all of that stuff. Just kind of figured out as, as we went. So, it was great. We actually just sold that boat and it's, you know, sort of an end of the era, but it took us to some, some wonderful places and we, we had great memories living aboard. So, for reference, not many people from Richmond end up living on those I think. It is a small living space. We had about 240 square feet of actual living space on the sailboat, but everything's very efficient. Everything has to have two purposes, so you make it work. But yeah, it's small living quarters.

Maggie Johnson:

That's awesome. You mentioned that you could have to travel in your house, which is pretty cool. What were some of those places you went to and do you have a favorite?

Becca Guillote:

Yeah, so we sailed, I don't know, something like 16,000 miles on that boat. So, the first thing we did actually immediately after buying it, we got a contract to work for a nonprofit up on the central coast of British Columbia. So, we left Seattle again, sort of having no idea what we were doing on the boat and headed north for a year, sailed through British Columbia and up to Alaska for another contract and, and back down. And that it turns out sort of in retrospect, now that we've sailed so many more miles, we cut our teeth in some of the most challenging navigable waters that there are. I mean, you can go to the Arctic or, you know, down the Antarctica. That's probably more challenging. But as far as sort of temperate zones go, some really challenging huge tides, and currents, and fog, and big logs, and navigational hazards, and rocks in the water, and other boats, and big cargo vessels, and all that. And so, we ended up on a steep learning curve and it was fantastic. We then, you know, we worked



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for a couple more years and then took off and headed south. I decided I did not need to spend another winter on the British Columbia coast. And as we cruise south, you know, we were always kind of looking at where could we settle down? You know, can we find a place that we love more than the area than where we're from? And we found ourselves continually looking back at the inside passage, this stretch of water from Seattle up to Southeast Alaska, as some of the most wonderful and beautiful places that we had visited. So, you know, we spent five years sort of down the West coast of North America, Mexico and Central America, and then across the Pacific to French Polynesia, and kind of the whole time, while I loved the warm, clear water and the tropical temperatures, you know, as far as sort of stunning beauty, and interesting cruising, and remote wilderness, we kept looking back. So, it's part of the reason why we're back in this area now.

Maggie Johnson:

I think that's so cool. You've kind of seen almost America from the water. Well mostly kind of always looking out at the water, which is, I guess, an interesting perspective to have.

Becca Guillote:

It's a really different way to experience a place by arriving by sailboat. You get a completely different perspective and an appreciation of that place, especially the far-flung ones, the ones that take you a couple weeks to sail to. So, you see land for the first time in a few weeks and it's pretty special experience. So, we've seen the parts of the West coast that touched the water. It's a pretty small percentage of North America, but it is a very interesting, different perspective.

Maggie Johnson:

But you've also gone into starting your own business. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Becca Guillote:

Oh yeah, we've started a few, sort of in between our time up in British Columbia and Alaska, and when we left head south. We started kayaking a paddle boarding company and we, my husband and I, started the business together, which is ill-advised by about anybody that you talk to, but it was sort of great proving ground for us and taught us that we actually work really well in a business partnership. That was a cool thing to learn. So yeah, we did rentals and tours off of a nearby beach and it was great. It's huge success, you know, small, very small business and small kind of initial investment to get it up and running. We were actually both still working full time since it was a bit of a juggling act there for a couple of years, but we just had a blast, you know, spending our weekends out on the beach, talking to

customers and getting out on the water and building the business, you know, strategizing on marketing and redesigning our logo and building the website, maintaining the accounting and just kind of all of that, that stuff, again, just a huge learning curve, having never done it. And it proved to both of us that we love doing that. We love sort of being entrepreneurial and running our own business, doing it together, and that we were pretty good at it. So, the business was very successful. We ended up selling it to our manager and it's still running, still growing, doing great right where it was when we left. So that was very cool. Since then, we've started a few more sort of service-oriented businesses or project-based businesses that allow us to just bring in some income while we're traveling. But that was the big one that we did.

Maggie Johnson:

So, you've mentioned kind of wearing a bunch of different hats. Is there like one part of the job that was your favorite?

Becca Guillote:

I am all operations. So, I am the back of the house managing all of the logistics and the purchasing and the accounting and all of that stuff. And my husband, it's a great balance. Cause my husband is all marketing and sales front of house stuff. He wants to talk to the customers and think up new ways for the business to grow. And I think, you know, doing that with a business led me to doing operations on my own as a consultant for a few other businesses. And that led me to the role that I have now, which is the director of operations for a product company. So that definitely set the stage for where I was headed career-wise.

Maggie Johnson:

That's great. What's that transition been like from working for yourself to working for a company?

Becca Guillote:

I think that the biggest transition right now that we're managing is having been traveling full time for five years. And when we travel, when you travel by sailboat, we were moving at approximately five miles an hour through the world. And so, your whole universe slows down to that speed, right? Nothing happens quickly when you're cruising. If you manage to get ashore and provision, get groceries in a day, like that's a successful day, right? Getting that one thing accomplished. It's just everything is inefficient and takes longer and you're just, everything's kind of slower. And we loved it, all parts of that. It took us a while to slow down into that life and appreciate it, but it's taken even longer for us to come back up to

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speed with life in America. And so, the transition, we've been back about a year and then transition back has been a pretty big challenge. So, in addition to transitioning from sort of working project-based stuff, you know, we were, I was doing business consulting and then I was writing articles. My husband is a photographer and so we would accompany sailing articles with beautiful photography. And that's kind of how we paid our way while we were cruising and did it on our own time. So, in addition to transitioning from that into a very high intensity, full-time, very full-time job, we're also transitioning from this sort of cruising lifestyle back into a city life. And yeah, it's been, it's been difficult. I think that, you know, we're still trying to find what that balance looks like for us trying to keep some of the elements of cruising life that we love amidst kind of the frenzy of living here.

Maggie Johnson:

I feel like that's a balance so many people are trying to strike that ever elusive work life balance. Yeah, that's really interesting. I'm really curious, you know, is there a single decision in your life that you can look back on and say, you know, that's what brought me here. That was a really big turning point for me.

I think there's been a couple. I mean, I think that probably going to Ghana was one of them just kind of taking a leap. And, you know, my friends were starting careers, working at banks and making a bunch of money and starting their retirement funds. And then off I went into the wilderness in Ghana. I got some confused looks, but it's one of the best things I've done. I think that starting the business was another one that really showed me what my strengths were and the type of work I wanted to do. And then saying yes to getting on a race boat when we had no idea how to sail, that certainly shaped the rest of our lives in a huge way. Just sort of stepping in and trying it out. We had absolutely no experience and lost all the races and made a bunch of mistakes. It led to a whole lifetime on the water.

Maggie Johnson:

Is there anything up to this point that you would consider your greatest achievement?

Becca Guillote:

My greatest achievement, I'm going to do a one-two pledge here. One is the, you know, part of my, ever since I started sailing, one of my dreams was to do this Pacific crossing that my cruising friends were talking about sailing from the West coast of either, well, we ended up leaving from Panama, but from Mexico or the West coast of the States and sailing to French Polynesia. And we did that. We did that in, a couple years ago, 2019. And that was a little over 4,000 miles. So, we were at sea about 36 days without sight of land. And that was something that I had dreamed about and worked towards for so long. And I loved it. I loved

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being out there. You kind of always have sort of an underlying anxiety because you're completely self-sufficient. There's absolutely nobody else out there that is gonna help you. You're in, on this, tiny little floating bubble of fiberglass in the middle of this vast ocean, but it's so freeing and so empowering to have done that. And as a result of that, and the many, many other miles I sailed, I got my captain's license. So, I'm a US Coast Guard licensed captain, 100-ton captain. So, I drive anything up to a hundred tons. And so that was a big accomplishment for me and something that I'm really proud of partially because it is an industry and a license that is dramatically weighted towards men. And so, to be a woman with a captain's license. You know, I still get, there's a lot of sexist comments in the boating world. I really like the empowerment to say, you know what, I'm actually a hundred-ton captain. I do actually know what I'm doing. So, it's just a nice little card to wave around when people are, you know, sort of being assumptive of what my skills are.

Maggie Johnson:

I love that you use the word empowerment there. I think that's so powerful and empowering that it's not just, oh, I'm dealing with this, but I'm almost thriving off of it.

Becca Guillote:

Yeah, I mean, I kind of, I want to be, part of the change, part of changing people's assumptions about what a captain looks like or what a woman's role is aboard a boat. I don't think that it's necessary to have those gender splits. And so, we don't have it on, on our boat. We are co-captains. We both drive the boat. We both cook meals. We both maintain the engine. We both sort of do all of the work in trade and that's really important to me.

Maggie Johnson:

That's really great. I love that. If you're comfortable talking about it, I'd love to ask, are you planning on raising your first kid on the boat?

Becca Guillote:

Yeah, so we sold the sailboat, came back last year and we've actually bought a trawler. We're on a powerboat now because it's a great live-a-board platform for this area. And so, the liveaboard and sort of local cruising again, sort of this British Columbia area that I've been talking about, this boat is perfect for it. And so, we're living aboard that and plan to continue living on this one with the little one when they come along. And then, um, you know, in a, in a couple of years or, you know, whatever life timeline allows, we will get another sailboat take off cruising again. So definitely, uh, hope this kid likes the water cause I'm not sure they're gonna have a choice.

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Maggie Johnson:

I love that. Excellent. I love to kind of like connect like UR back to where you are now. If you look back at your time at UR, would your former self be surprised by where you are now?

Becca Guillote:

Oh my goodness, yes. Yeah, I don't know that there was any way, for my, my university self to predict the path I was going to take. It's been, you know, meandering, certainly. You know, I think that a lot of the elements were there at university, you know, this, of course, the drive to travel and kind of just jump in and do it. You know, I like playing harp. Uh, I'd never played harp before. It just was something that was interesting and having the opportunity to just kind of jump in and try stuff and see, see what stuck and see what I enjoyed and thrived on. And I knew, I mean, I think that especially coming back from being abroad, I knew that travel was always going to be a really important aspect of my life. Did I know that I would do it on a sailboat for five years? And I'm not sure I could have predicted that. But yeah, I think that there were definitely the sort of foundational elements, but yeah. It's a far cry from living in Richmond and working a job there.

Maggie Johnson:

Did you keep up with the harp playing after college?

Becca Guillote:

For a while I did actually. One of my jobs that I managed to get when we first moved to Seattle was at a music shop and is a really unique music shop. They made their own harps. And part of the reason I got the job was because I had experience with these harps. And so, I was able to check one out, take it home. And so, I had a harp at home and then I would play sort of, you know, at the shop when nobody was there and I was tuning them all the time, the ones on the floor. So, once I had to give that back though and then I moved on to the boat, got a little bit harder. So, I have not kept it up since then, unfortunately. My music instrument collection has to be quite small these days, but one day, one day I'll get back to it.

Maggie Johnson:

I love that. So, what do you play now?

Becca Guillote:

Because of my time in Australia, I ended up writing my thesis on the didgeridoo, the Australian, that everybody describes it as the wow wow instrument, they blow into it. And I

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brought a beautiful didgeridoo home. I took lessons when I was in Australia, brought a beautiful one home. So, I have my didgeridoo on the boat. And I have a guitar on the boat. And I, I attempted to pick up harmonica while we were cruising, thinking that that was the perfect boat instrument. You can fit it in your pocket and it makes it hard to go out of tune. Turns out it's a lot harder than it looks. I got to start with harmonica while we were cruising. I'm not sure I ever got particularly proficient, but I'll pick that back up when we're out on the water again, I think.

Maggie Johnson:

I love that. That is one final question for you. What does it mean to be a spider?

Becca Guillote:

What does it mean to be a spider? To be a spider means to be proud of where you come from and the accomplishments that you have in your life and that you are self-sufficient and empowered to go out and do whatever it is that you want to do.

[outro music]

Maggie Johnson:

Thanks for listening to “As Spiders Do” from the University of Richmond Office of Alumni Relations. We hope you enjoyed hearing from today's alumni guests and learned a little bit more about what it means to be a Richmond Spider. Thank you to Olivia Huber, Class of 2025, for editing this episode. Our episode music is by [FAS Sounds](#) from [Pixabay](#). You can subscribe to “As Spiders Do” wherever you get your podcasts and leave us a review to let us know what you think. We're always looking for new stories to share, so let us know who else we should feature by emailing us at alumni@richmond.edu. That's all for this episode. Talk to you soon, and remember, there are spiders everywhere. And that's a really good thing.