

## Bret Gilliam, a scuba diver at heart

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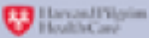
In his varied career, Arrowsic resident Bret Gilliam has been many things: An entrepreneur, a Navy officer, a photographer and CEO of multiple multi-million dollar companies. But through it all, at heart he has remained a scuba diver.

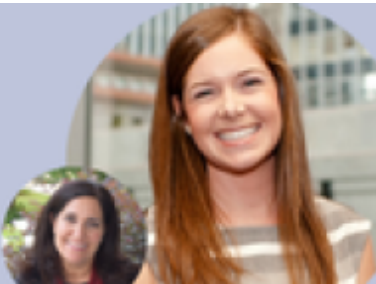
Gilliam's passion for scuba diving began at the unordinary age of eight, while his father, a naval officer, was stationed in Key West, Florida. The year was 1959, and Gilliam had just seen the first episode of Sea Hunt, what he calls the definitive television series on scuba diving. Inspired by what he saw, he got permission from his father to take scuba diving lessons.

"Most of the other parents were horrified that he would do that," said Gilliam.



A PHOTO of a whale shark in Triton Bay, Indonesia, taken by Bret Gilliam. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO / BRET GILLIAM

Maine Trust for Local News  
**OPEN DOOR**  
 Presented by  Harvard Pilgrim HealthCare  
**Megan Walton**  
 CEO, Southern Maine Agency on Aging  
**WEDNESDAY, FEB. 26 | 8 a.m.**  
 The Roux Institute at Northeastern University



Megan Walton, CEO of the Southern Maine Agency on Aging will sit down for a conversation with Maine Trust for Local News managing director, Stefanie Manning. Doors open at 7:30 a.m., coffee and light breakfast will be available.

It was just a few years later that he first turned his passion into a business venture.

“When I was 10, I started my first business,” said Gilliam. “I had a fish trapping/collecting business... where I sold them to the Key West Aquarium.”

The industrious 10-year-old would take out his family’s Boston Whaler and dive 20-60 feet to set and collect traps for tropical fish. Too young for a driver’s license to transport the fish, Gilliam would pay an ensign who served on the same base as his father to drive him and his specimens to the various aquariums, where he’d sell them at a profit.

Of course, the ensign demanded a larger pay cut when Gilliam switched to catching and selling sharks.

Within a few years, Gilliam’s little summer business was pulling in about \$5,000 a year.

“That was more money than a junior naval officer was making at that time,” said Gilliam.

“My dad was a tremendous influence and charted me on the right path, and for some reason or other seemed to have instincts that allowed me to take different routes that other people didn’t do,” said Gilliam. “Other kids in the summer time worked in restaurants...I was out scuba diving, and cleaning propellers and ship bottoms.”

Still, Gilliam wasn’t destined to stay at Key West forever. In 1963, his father was named Executive Officer at Brunswick Naval Air Station and they moved to Harpswell, where they lived on a yacht in Mackerel Cove. After a brief two-year stint at a Virginia base, the family returned to Brunswick Naval Air Station, where his father would retire.

Though less tropical than Key West, the young Gilliam continued to make a living off the water while many of his peers were working in restaurants or in the tourism industry during the summer. Gilliam’s work was wide and varied — from collecting sea moss for a processor on Orr’s Island to a brief foray as a professional surfer. As a Brunswick High senior, Gilliam spent the summer opening and operating a surfing retail shop in Portland.

It was in high school that Gilliam had his first run-in with journalism. In 1967, Gilliam began working as a sports writer for The Times Record, with no idea that one day his work would show up in dozens of publications, and he himself would serve as publisher of three diving-related magazines.

“I think in all honesty, what I have taken the greatest satisfaction in is publishing,” he said. “I was completely self-taught.”

After graduation from Brunswick High School, he went to study history at Bowdoin College. Despite his early and ongoing forays into business and diving, Gilliam said at the time he planned to become a teacher. But the Navy had other plans for him.

Gilliam had enrolled at Bowdoin College with an ROTC scholarship, meaning he had to serve six years as a 2nd Lieutenant after graduation. For Gilliam that meant heading to Southeast Asia to take part in the Vietnam War. But in January 1971, Gilliam received an offer from the Navy to join a secret naval project instead of serving in the Army.

“In those days, the life expectancy of a 2nd Lieutenant in Vietnam was about six weeks,” he recalled. “So when the Department of the Navy came to see me in January of 1971 and told me that they had a project that was such a high priority they wanted to recruit me from the Army and take over my obligation... I volunteered.”

Despite not knowing anything about the project, Gilliam boarded a plane at Brunswick Naval Air Station bound for destination unknown. Four hours later, they landed in Puerto Rico. Gilliam would spend the next few months between Puerto Rico and Saint Croix, where he'd utilize his scuba diving experience to film submarines, collecting data that would help the Navy design them to be even quieter. The team that was supposed to do the work had declined to work at the depths required, but Gilliam and his team had no problem descending below 500 feet, where much of the work was to occur — an unheard of depth at that time.

“We changed the way that the Navy did their diving,” said Gilliam.

In June 1971, the Navy determined that the project had been successful and began shutting the program down. Gilliam's six-year commitment was deemed complete, and he received an honorable discharge.

And then his career really took off.

In 1973, he founded V.I. Divers in the U.S. Virgin Islands, a company doing everything from providing diving support for research, to commercial diving, to working on film and television productions in need of diving support. In less than three years, they were raking in \$1 million a year in revenue.

### Taking other routes

Gilliam worked in the entertainment industry on and off as his career went different directions. He would go on to work on “The Deep,” “The Island of Dr. Moreau” and “Miami Vice.” Over the years, Gilliam estimates that he worked on 40-50 movies and television shows.

But in 1985, Gilliam sold off all his ventures for millions, taking a few years to cruise the world in his yacht. In 1987, he shifted gears and launched a cruise ship company targeting scuba divers. He bought the 550-foot flagship Ocean Spirit cruise ship of Norwegian Cruise Line, completely renovated it and redesigned the interior, launching as Ocean Quest International. The cruise featured 10 dive boats and would bring scuba divers to various exotic locales. Before the first cruise had even taken place, Gilliam said he had received \$5 million in profit by selling part of the company.

He was just 36 at the time. He sold his part of the company in 1990.

It was around that time that he started looking into moving back to the United States and relocating to Maine.

“In a lot of ways, Maine was the Caribbean with four seasons, because of all the islands and the ocean and the neat marine life,” said Gilliam. “I had not seen four seasons since college.”

In Maine, Gilliam started a company named UWATEC that manufactured dive computers as well as a dive certification training agency. He would eventually take UWATEC public for \$44 million.

“The aggregate value of these companies, from what I started in 1973 to the last one that I sold...was right about \$80 million,” said Gilliam.

“It all basically boils down to this: If you give people a good product at a good value and customer service is everything, you can beat up on companies that are huge compared to you,” he added. “That’s what I built every company on.”

Gilliam has sold off his various companies and publications; at his Arrowsic home, he's surrounded by memorabilia from the places he's been and the people he's met along the way. While he no longer runs multi-million dollar companies, he continues to provide expert testimony on diving-related legal matters.

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