


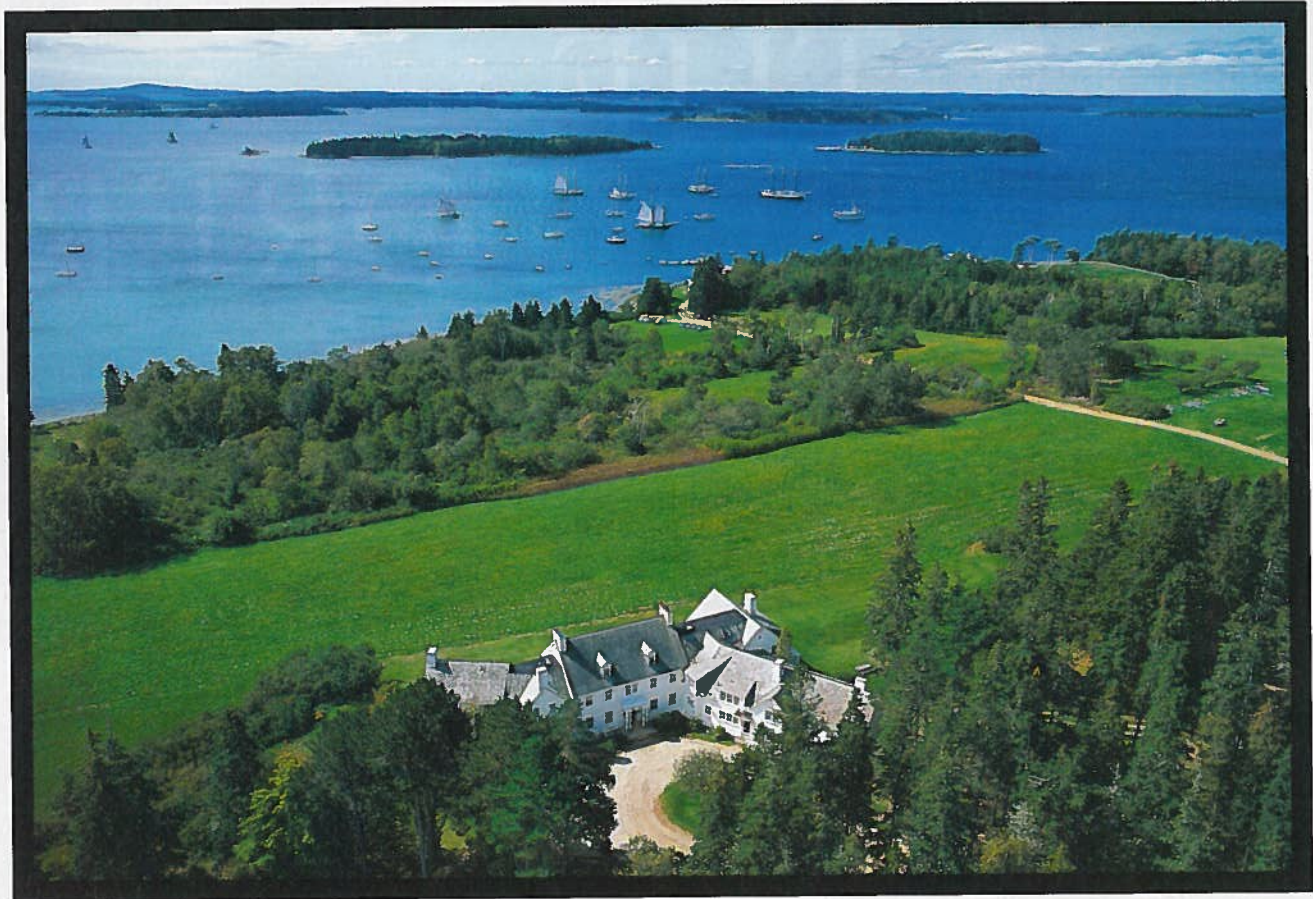
IN THE
WORLD OF
WOODEN
BOATS,
JON WILSON
IS A LEGEND.
FEW KNOW
ABOUT HIS
OTHER LIFE
IN TROUBLED
WATERS.

THE RESTORER

BY IAN ALDRICH
PORTRAIT BY SHOSHANNAH WHITE



The water still calls to him. Nearly 40 years living in Down East Maine hasn't changed that for Jon Wilson. He's not on the ocean as much as he'd like—his work keeps him more tethered to the land than it used to, he'll say—but the longtime sailor still gets out there when he can. He's navigated a good portion of the East Coast and drifted around the Caribbean, but Maine's waters—"so raw in a way," he says—still captivate him. Penobscot Bay and its scattered islands, the expansive, never-ending feel of the Atlantic off Naskeag Point, the winds that rush along Eggemoggin Reach ... these are the places he returns to again and again.



Jon Wilson and WoodenBoat Publications make their home in Brooklin, Maine, on a 65-acre oceanfront property anchored by a sprawling old summer mansion. Wilson restored the house in the early 1980s and turned it into his company's headquarters.

On those clear, sun-drenched summer days, when blue sky and warm winds make it seem as though winter will never return, Wilson and his wife, Sherry Streeter, board their sailboat—a 34-foot cruiser that's nearly as old as its 65-year-old owner—and let it lumber along at a steady five or six knots. Sometimes they steer to a favorite island; other times, Wilson's looking for something else. "It's a visceral feeling," he says. "That sense of oneness with the boat, the water, and the wind."

It seems so idyllic. And yet, he doesn't let himself remain here too long. "There's a part of me that could just stay out there," he says. "I have to fight it. For me it feels a little self-indulgent. I just feel as though I can do so much more ashore."

You see, amid all that quiet, all that lovely isolation, Wilson's mind often drifts back to land, back to work, back to the lives he's gotten to know almost

Jon Wilson believes that something that's been broken, something that's been abandoned, can be put back together.

as well as these Maine waters. Wilson's legacy and fortunes, of course, are secure. He's grown WoodenBoat Publications and its namesake magazine, which he started in 1974 out of a tiny cabin in North Brooksville, Maine, into an \$8-million-a-year brand. There's a gorgeous house on the shores of the Reach in Brooklin and that boat he adores, and yet, increasingly, all of it has migrated to the background of his life. Instead, Wilson has placed himself on the front lines of the restorative-justice movement. Through a small nonprofit called JUST Alternatives, which he

founded in 2003, Wilson has poured himself into an intensive process of preparing and facilitating meetings between survivors of violent crimes and their offenders.

Known as victim-offender dialogue (VOD), this is a world of mothers devastated by the loss of murdered children; wives trying to move past years of domestic abuse; rage and anger, recovery and forgiveness. Wilson is part counselor, part friend, part advocate. And, in a way, it's not as much of a break from his publishing past as it might first appear.

KIP BRUNDAGE/COURTESY OF WOODENBOAT PUBLICATIONS

"I think in terms of possibilities," he says. "That's what *WoodenBoat* was: the possibility of durability, the possibility of the value of wooden boats and culture. That's all anything I do is."

He is, in other words, still restoring—still a believer that something that's been broken, that's been abandoned, can be put back together. It's different work—deeper work, he says—but it's similar work. Which is why, even when he's out on his boat, the people Wilson deals with are never far from him. "It's unavoidable," he says. "You carry their stories and their pain. I don't find it easy to let go of. I love making a difference. I love being of consequence. I love being responsible for making sure something is happening."

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Jon Wilson's home and work settings are defined by the water. *WoodenBoat* Publications, just a few hundred yards from his house, is located in Brooklin, a small coastal town that's home to boat-builders and summer folk who want a rural slice of oceanfront property without Massachusetts prices. Here, in this no-stop-light town, Wilson's company isn't just the biggest employer—there are 40 people on staff—it occupies the biggest house, too. Set on 65 acres of rolling, waterfront land dotted with apple trees and pines, the magazine's main building is a former summer mansion, built for a Boston family in 1916. In its heyday, the property hadn't been cheated of any amenities—the nearby barn included a full apartment for the chauffeur—but at the time Wilson scooped it up in 1980, the home had sat abandoned for several years.

Wilson renovated the place, and the big building still retains the feel of a rambling yet homey summer place. Offices are converted bedrooms; Wilson's workspace occupies the master bedroom. Wilson—who has a full head of salt-and-pepper hair, soft green eyes framed by round, rimless glasses, and a fashion preference that favors Levis—moves with purpose when he walks, but there's a carefree air about him, too; he's the kind of guy who has a penchant for sliding down the banister of the building's main staircase. (A few years ago, the front-office secretary ordered the

removal of a glass-door cabinet at the base of the stairs, out of fear that her boss would slide right into it.)

In Wilson's office at *WoodenBoat* Publications, items like a marine radio, telescope, and boat prints share space with black filing cabinets stuffed with case material, a desk stacked with piles of notes on offenders and victims, and bookshelves with titles such as *Alabama Department of Corrections* and *Violent Crime Behavior*. This amalgamation of the different pieces of his life has created a space that few understand. His presence at *WoodenBoat*, in fact, is a curious one. When he's home in Maine, he's at his office nearly every day. But he's largely removed from the running of the company, and as one employee put it, "I'm not sure a lot of people really understand what it is Jon does."

It can be tough to explain. The context for it, though, goes like this. In 1996, two years after Wilson stepped away from the company's day-to-day operations, he launched a magazine called *Hope*, which profiled people and movements making a positive difference in communities across the country. Wilson had been researching an article on restorative justice when he stumbled across the story of a Minnesota couple, Don and Mary Streufert, who had met with the two men who had raped and killed their 18-year-old daughter. He was flabbergasted by the decision, and a phone call to the parents soon led him to a Texas minister, David Doerfler, who'd launched victim-offender dialogues in his home state, as well as training sessions so that others like him could lead those dialogues.

Wilson wrote about Doerfler, and then did a second piece about his facilitator training. To report on the story, Wilson agreed to take part in the training and to then lead and prepare one of the hundreds of Texas cases that were awaiting facilitators. "Sherry and others who knew me said, 'Whoo boy, your life is about to change,'" he says. "I thought, *Yeah, my life is going to change. I'm going to learn some things I've never known.* But I didn't see it changing the way they did."

"He definitely gets immersed in whatever he's doing, but it's different with the dialogues," says Streeter,

his wife of 23 years. "It's more whole. It's more him. He doesn't stress. With *WoodenBoat* he'd stress about advertising, about employees, about other things. He's calmer now, more even."

Wilson doesn't recruit the VOD work; it's strictly a victim-led initiation process that comes through a state's victim-services agency. He's made a name for himself in states such as Louisiana, Texas, and Kentucky, as well as around New England, through both his work and his availability. And because of *WoodenBoat*'s continued success, Wilson doesn't charge for his expenses or his time, which can be considerable. Cases may take up to a year to complete, requiring multiple one-on-one sessions between Wilson and the survivor, and Wilson and the offender, before survivor and offender are ready to meet each other in person.

For Wilson, those preparatory meetings are a chance for him to help each person "find the words" for his or her emotions. But it's rocky territory, putting Wilson in the trenches of a relived crime, a drawn-out court drama, a broken life.

"As a facilitator, you're going straight to the source of the pain," says Doerfler. "Healing is about the chance to grieve. To do this work, you've got to have a strong sense of who you are. And Jon has that. He knows his strengths and weaknesses. His greatest gift is his ability to listen. That allows people to do their own work."

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Jon Wilson has always been a good listener. His ability to navigate the complicated terrain that defined his home life in Kingston, Rhode Island, depended upon it. His parents, Virginia and Lee, fought often before finally divorcing when Wilson, the youngest of three children, was 5 years old. His father, an English professor at the University of Rhode Island, battled with alcohol and died six years later. Wilson's mother kept the household going through a series of secretarial jobs, while struggling with schizophrenia. Her illness sometimes brought on long stays in the hospital, forcing her children to find shelter with different family members.



For Jon Wilson, the essence of his work comes down to giving the victim a chance to be heard and ensuring that the offender is "prepared to feel a level of accountability." ABOVE, in one of his earliest cases, Wilson stands in the background as Janet Connors meets with one of the men who murdered her 19-year-old son, Joel Turner, during a home invasion in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in January 2001.

(In a second meeting after his release, this offender demonstrates courage and accountability to the survivor.)

"It was a complicated time," Wilson says. "One thing I learned was that to stay safe, to keep from being yelled at or hit, I had to really pay attention. I had to anticipate the mood and make sure I didn't step on a mine that my brother or sister had just stepped on. ... I felt different from other kids. Our family was the only one that was divorced in town, and my father was the only one I knew of who was an alcoholic, so I felt enough of an outsider that it instilled in me a kind of sensitivity to outsiders, and that's critical to who I am and how I work."

Where everything changed for Wilson and his mother was the water. Summers found Virginia setting up a home base at an old family camp in the middle of Connecticut's Thimble Islands. Here, the Wilson kids, and especially their mother, seemed soothed by the waters, where familiar tensions and battles calmly dissipated.

"At that camp, everything was okay," Wilson says. "And I loved just being on

the water: the ease, the motion. I felt at home on it."

He soon wanted to build a life around it. In 1966, Wilson landed work at Dutch Wharf Boat Yard, a shop in Branford, Connecticut, that specialized in high-end wooden yachts. In an age when fiberglass technology and poor craftsmanship were killing the industry, Wilson fell in love with not only the yard's appreciation for wooden boats but also the culture and characters around it. "I saw right away that it wasn't enough to build a wooden boat," he says. "We had to make them endure. I saw the power and potential [of these boats]. These guys I worked with did beautiful work, but they saw themselves just as tradesmen. It's just lucky that I ended up there. If I hadn't, *WoodenBoat*, as I know it, wouldn't have existed."

Eventually Wilson and his first wife, Susie Garfield, landed in Maine. After trying to make a go of it as an independent boatbuilder, Wilson gam-

bled that the industry might support its own publication. He saw a chance not only to honor the culture and craftsmanship he'd discovered at Dutch Wharf but also to showcase newer technologies that might make wooden boats viable again.

With \$11,000 he'd made selling a boat that he'd fixed up, plus another \$3,500 borrowed from friends, Wilson put out his first issue of *WoodenBoat* magazine in 1974 from his cabin in North Brooksville. "I knew there were people out there who were interested in this subject, and I knew there were people trying to make a living building boats," he says. "And I wanted to make sure what was worth preserving could be preserved."

WoodenBoat grew almost from the beginning. At the end of its first year, the magazine reached some 9,000 subscribers. Ten years later, Wilson's operation was grossing \$2.5 million annually, and the magazine had more than

LISA KESSLER

100,000 subscribers. All this from a company that was the anti-Time Inc.—a place where editors doubled as landscapers, and every staffer, including the boss, drew the same \$113.50 weekly paycheck. “It was young and chaotic and a pretty joyful place to work,” says John Hanson, the magazine’s former ad director. “It was a place [where] you got to be creative and weird.”

But for Wilson, success brought contemplation and complex feelings about making money and “amounting to something in a contributing way.” In the late 1970s a “spiritual crisis” around this very issue drove him to consider giving the company away so that he

was a 17-year-old with a vicious drug habit. He was apprehended a few days after the crime and eventually sentenced to life in prison with a possibility of parole. David had been strident in court and had maintained his assertion of innocence right up until one hot summer day, when Jon Wilson made an unannounced visit to the Houston prison where he was being held. Wilson told him that his victim’s daughter, now a 27-year-old Minnesota woman and mother of three, whom we’ll call Katherine, wanted to see him.

“I get there and I’m thinking, *This is crazy; he’s not going to want to talk,*” recalls Wilson. “But I introduced

trying to avoid. “I take full responsibility. I’m guilty. Feel free to ask me whatever you want. This is your day.”

Katherine’s hard eyes are watering now. Wilson, who sits between the two and whose square, brown-framed glasses hang on the edge of his nose, appears nervous. But he moves the conversation along, asking questions, prompting the two participants to touch on the areas that he has dissected and gone over with each of them during the preparative meetings.

Wilson is brutally clear about his intentions and biases: He’s there for the survivor, who, he tells me, is boxed in by a legal process that restricts his or her voice during the legal process. The survivor’s only real chance to address an offender comes at the end of a trial, through a victim-impact statement. That’s assuming, of course, that there is a trial, or that the survivor is old enough to address the court. In Katherine’s case, for example, her family waited until she was in her teens before telling her how her mother had died. That’s why these dialogues are important, Wilson tells me: It forces offenders to confront their crimes in a way they haven’t had to.

“A victimization or violation is not a misunderstanding,” Wilson says. “It is something horrible and traumatizing. I don’t care about reconciliation. I don’t care about forgiveness. I just care that the victim gets to be heard and the offender understands what the victim is saying and is prepared to feel a level of accountability. That’s all I want.”

As the dialogue continues, Wilson soon pushes things into difficult territory. He takes out a beautiful color print, the last image ever taken of Katherine with her mom. It’s a summer scene: mother in jeans, a red shirt, and red bandanna stretched across the top of her cropped hair; daughter smiling, mother’s arm around her, as the two sit in front of an old barn. Wilson cautions David about what he’s going to show him. “This is gonna hurt,” Wilson tells David. Wilson reaches across the table and holds Katherine’s arm. He reveals the image. David stares at the print and breaks down in tears. “This is what she doesn’t have anymore,” Wilson says.

“Healing is about the chance to grieve,” says Rev. David Doerfler. “To do this work, you’ve got to have a strong sense of who you are. Jon’s greatest gift is his ability to listen. That allows people to do their own work.”

and Susie and their two young boys could go live in an intentional community in Scotland. He stepped away for a few issues, then returned, more at peace with himself and his success. But after founding a thriving boatbuilding school in 1981 and launching a second successful magazine (*Professional Boat-Builder*) in 1989, Wilson was feeling the pangs to do something different with his life. “I feel like I’m taking up space on the planet,” he says. “For me, it’s *How do I make myself worthy enough?* It’s kind of a flaw, but it drives my work, and has always driven my work. I could never quite do well enough, so I kept trying to do it better.”

Wilson’s first foray into the world of victim-offender dialogues came in 2000. The case revolved around a 1978 robbery-turned-murder of a 30-year-old single mother in the parking lot outside a Houston restaurant. The killer, whom we’ll call David,

myself and told him, “The daughter of the victim wants to meet with you,” and he just started to cry. He put his head down and sobbed. It was amazing.”

One of Wilson’s most prized possessions is a batch of VHS tapes and DVDs related to his work—documentaries, news stories, and so on. And of those, his most cherished recording is the one of David and Katherine’s dialogue session in 2001. The meeting takes place in a white-paneled visiting room at the Houston prison. There’s a small table around which Wilson and Katherine are sitting; when David walks in, Katherine stands up, shakes his hand, and then sits back down, directly across from him.

“I don’t think I ever thought you’d do this, the way you acted in court,” Katherine tells David. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” David replies. “I’m really glad you requested this. It’s a privilege to be here.” What follows next are words he spent 23 years of his life

Then Wilson silently rolls out other photographs: one of David as he was admitted to prison, and another of him at the age of 10, his baby sister in his arms. It's a simple but powerful display, and it sets up one of the important story arcs that Katherine is here to explore: how a bubbly, smiling little boy became the man who took her mother's life. Wilson lets the situation play out; he says nothing. Finally, Katherine speaks up. "I want to know why," she says. "What was going on in your life that could lead to something that horrible?"

David delves into his life story: a tough neighborhood; peer pressure; drug use; shoplifting. And then a night when he spotted a young woman and her friend walking to their car in a lonely parking lot. Katherine stares at him, the fingers of her left hand fiddling with her lips as she hears David describe the robbery and then the stabbing.

When he finishes, there's a long pause. Katherine looks down at the table. "And you took her purse anyway?" she asks. David is choking up again. Until now, Katherine's words have been measured. She's posed careful, specific questions about his intentions, but now she lets things go. "She loved me in a way you will never know," she says forcefully. She collects herself: "You took all that away from me." Her eyes are now fixed on him: "I wish she'd beaten you until she fell down dead. ... I have everything from her up until my sixth birthday, and then there's nothing. You took all that away from me."

The hours go by. David explains how the last 23 years have changed him. Katherine listens, sometimes looking at him, other times down at the table. She unleashes more anger. "I always wondered where God was when my mother was killed," she says. "I lost Him, but I came crawling back to Him, no thanks to you."

In time, there's a break in Katherine's tone. The more she speaks, the softer her voice. She loses her edge. Her anger dissipates. "I know this is hard for you," David tells her.

"It's hard for you, too," she says.

At the end, Katherine hands David a copy of a scrapbook she's made about her mother's life. It's his to keep. And

then she tells the man who killed her mother that if he gets out of prison, she'll be there for moral support: "I want to be there for you." The two then get up from the table and exchange a long hug. It's an unexpected part of the script. On tape, Wilson leans back in his chair, both hands atop his head. He looks relieved. He looks triumphant. So does Katherine.

Today Wilson watches the screen with the same amazement he felt when he saw the scene play out live in April 2001. He stops the tape. "She looks different, doesn't she?" he says. "It's all about having been heard by him—getting a chance to say to him, 'You took my mother away from me; you took God away from me.' That's what happens when you get a chance to do that. That's what makes me do what I do."

Part of that includes telling others about his work. Take this afternoon, a late winter day at the University of Maine at Orono. After a storm, a foot of fresh snow plays beautifully against the blue sky. Wilson is here to speak to about 20 undergraduates. Being on the road is a regular thing for him these days, driving around New England, ducking in and out of airports in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Texas, where he regularly leads VOD sessions. Currently he's working on five cases, plus training sessions in Kansas and Louisiana.

Wilson likes being in the classroom. Today's group, a "peace studies" class of freshmen and sophomores, trickles into a second-floor classroom just before 2:00. Several are clicking away on laptops as Wilson and the professor wheel a TV into the room, to little notice. Finally, one woman, a blonde with square glasses and wearing a pink, polka-dotted UMaine sweatshirt, looks up and sees the set. "So, we're watching a movie, right?" she asks. "Well, how soon are we watching it? Because if it's not too soon, I'd like to open the blinds. I'm really, really sleepy, and this is the longest day of the week for me."

"We'll be watching it soon," the professor replies. "But if you need to splash your face with cold water, go ahead."

Following the professor's introduction, Wilson steps to the head of

the class. He remains standing as he tells his story, how he started doing restorative-justice work. He's a casual speaker; he clutches his chest whenever he begins to talk about a survivor he's worked with. As he talks, the students pay closer attention.

Wilson slips off his blue blazer and takes questions from the group. *Has he ever worked with gangs?* (No.) *How come the victim doesn't just rant and rave?* "If they do, the offender will just shut down," he explains. "It's not that he doesn't deserve it, but he can't deal with it, so my job is to help the survivor deflect the anger." *Could he do that himself?* "I have no idea," he says. "I might still want to kill him. I might feel like I would go crazy in that room. It's a beautiful process to watch, but I don't know if I'd be capable of doing it."

Wilson slips a DVD into the TV. It's a clip from a news program detailing a VOD session, led by David Doerfler, between Paula Kurland, a Texas woman whose daughter was brutally murdered during a home invasion, and the daughter's killer, Jonathan Nobles. The meeting had taken place just two weeks before the offender's execution.

It's hard to watch. The cameras track Kurland's back-and-forth on whether she can meet with Nobles; her family's reluctance to support her; and then the meeting itself. As the tape plays, some students wince; more than a few wipe away tears. When it concludes, Wilson steps back in front of the class, where the students sort out their emotions.

"Jonathan found peace 'cause he was gonna die in two weeks," says the young woman in the pink sweatshirt. Another student agrees: "This may be the wrong thing to say, but it made me angry that he was forgiven." The class debates the merits of what Wilson is doing; some fish for more details about how he works. It's gritty talk, both analytical and philosophical. "If we can't be heard," Wilson reminds them, "we're trapped in our own experience."

Wilson's energy picks up as the afternoon wanes. He loves that these students are talking about this stuff, even if some of them don't agree with what he's doing. "You're great," he tells the class. "I just love how open you are."

Finally Wilson looks up at the clock. It's time to go. He looks disappointed. "I could go on," he says. "You really have to shut me up here."

Wilson doesn't know how long he can keep doing this kind of work. He does know there's an end point—that there will come a time when the travel, and the emotional toll, will be too much. After that? He might write, maybe publish a book that tells the story of his work and "why it is I do what I do." But for now he goes on, and can go on, because of Brooklin. This little town is his buffer. It's where he decompresses; it's where he can sift through the wrenching stories people tell him; can absorb them. It's where he comes home.

"To listen to what a survivor lives with, I'm glad to be able to do it. I'm grateful to be able to do it," he says. "But if I couldn't get away from it, if I couldn't come home ..." He pauses. "Keep in mind where I live. I'm in Maine, overlooking the water, one of the most beautiful places on earth. There's something really important about being able to come home."

Home is where I found Wilson one morning this past August. As he pledges to do every year, he'd tried to make it a quiet month. He'd stayed off the road and, as best he could, kept to a promise he'd made to Sherry that he'd spend less time in the office and more time on the water. But it hadn't been an entirely clean break. Earlier in the summer, he'd picked up the 19th case of his career, a complicated one involving a Louisiana family, one that centers on domestic and sexual assault. In July Wilson had flown to Baton Rouge for his first series of visits with the offender and victims. He was planning a second trip for September, and Wilson's mind occasionally advanced to that next round of sessions.

"Once I'm on the boat, everything's fine," Wilson said. "But sometimes I have to be dragged down there."

This morning, though, Wilson's focus was on his 22-foot Chris-Craft Cutlass, a sleek 43-year-old powerboat that he'd bought two years ago and had had completely renovated by his friend Brion Rieff, a local boatbuilder. They'd

refinished the teak trim, built a new fiberglass cabin, and installed a bigger engine. Yet, during its official launch the week before, Wilson had discovered some issues with the engine, and now he needed to get the boat, which was anchored a few hundred yards offshore, back to Rieff's shop.

It was a blue-sky morning, the water taking on a dark shade of turquoise. After catching a ride out to the boat, Wilson climbed aboard. "Let's take it out for just a second," he said. He fired up the engine, letting its low rumble settle in over the harbor. "You hear that?" Wilson asked proudly. "She just wants to go. That sound is why I wanted this boat."

Soon we were motoring slowly around the harbor, around the world he'd helped restore. This piece of water, which had been largely empty when he first came to Brooklin, was now a postcard scene of vintage sailboats. Onshore, the WoodenBoat campus was buzzing with action. Students, some of whom had come from as far away as Virginia and Ontario, were cranking along on saws and other power tools in the school's old brick barn, while a troupe of tourists, in the middle of a weeklong sail around Penobscot Bay on a vintage windjammer, were making their way to The WoodenBoat Store for shirts, hats, and gifts. Not far from the water's edge, a group of older watercolor students were working to capture the harbor in shades of greens and blues.

After a few minutes at sea, Wilson spotted Rieff backing his truck and trailer up to the water; it was time to go. Wilson reluctantly redirected toward land. He'd be back soon, though. In a few days he and Sherry would be on their bigger sailboat, for a two-night trip they'd planned to Mount Desert Island. They'd see some friends, catch an art show—just get away. When they'd return, Brooklin would be waiting. And just like always, as they'd be lumbering along the final stretches of the Reach, WoodenBoat's shores would come into focus. Wilson's office, too. Soon, his mind would return to the land. There would be work to do. 🍷