

Setting the Bar High

An Interview with Audrey Willmot,
Vice President of Operations, Safe Harbor Marinas



The pool at Safe Harbor Harbortown marina in Fort Pierce, Florida

EDITORS' NOTE Audrey Willmot served as the General Manager at Safe Harbor Harbortown in Fort Pierce, Florida, a 344-slip marina located on the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, and most recently as the Regional Business Manager for the east coast of Florida. Willmot joined the marina in 2005 and has devoted the past 15 years to developing it into a premier full-service facility. She is a native Floridian and received a bachelor's degree in history from the University of South Florida.



Audrey Willmot

COMPANY BRIEF Safe Harbor Marinas (sbmarinas.com) is the largest owner and operator of marinas in the world. Safe Harbor prides itself on maintaining the highest standards of quality and customer service across its portfolio of inland and coastal properties. The company has decades of industry experience and a proven history in acquisitions, management, and partnership strategies.

What attracted you to the marina industry?

I received my B.A. in history from the University of South Florida, and my intention was to become an attorney. However, life has a funny way of surprising us sometimes, and after meeting my husband and starting a family, we decided to move back to where I grew up in Fort Pierce. At the time, my mother was working for a citrus company that was located across the street from what used to be known as Harbortown Marina. One day, she happened to notice a job posting while she was on her way to the marina to have lunch. When I heard about the opportunity, I decided to interview for the job, and I started the very next day.

I began by working in accounting, but my role grew and I eventually landed in operations. I quickly realized that the marina was where I wanted to be and I fell in love with the industry.

How has Safe Harbor Harbortown's integration into the Safe Harbor Marinas network progressed, and how do you define the Safe Harbor difference?

Safe Harbor is truly setting the bar in the marina industry. Our scale allows us to offer our members best-in-class benefits and amenities that privately-owned marinas and smaller portfolios are simply unable to offer.

Furthermore, I think what really sets Safe Harbor apart is our emphasis on serving each of our four key stakeholders: our members, employees, shareholders, and the environment. We realize that it takes a focus on all four of these stakeholders to succeed and, without any one of them, the others will not survive. As an example, I was serving as the General Manager at Harbortown when Safe Harbor acquired the marina. Having worked for a small-business owner over the previous ten years, I didn't know what to expect with a large company taking ownership. I assumed there would be plenty of changes and new policies and procedures, but I didn't expect the genuine compassion that Safe Harbor fosters and encourages among its employees.

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I experienced this compassion personally when, less than a year after I joined the Safe Harbor team, my son began having medical issues that resulted in our family needing to travel to Denver for a lengthy clinical trial. During that time, I received such a tremendous

amount of encouragement and support from every level in the company. Safe Harbor did everything possible to accommodate my situation and allow me to take the necessary time away with my family. Throughout that experience, everyone treated me like I had worked for the company for 20 years. At that point, I knew I had found something very special with Safe Harbor.

Safe Harbor provides a network for its members with a broad range of services and offerings. How has this focus evolved at Safe Harbor Harbortown?

Safe Harbor Harbortown is a unique property inside the Fort Pierce Inlet. Being located in one of the oldest cities in Florida, it is critical to business that we maintain the marina's heritage and local charm while also investing in ongoing improvements and upgrades for our members such as the new resort pool that was completed earlier this year.

As we continue to build the Safe Harbor network, it is essential that we provide our members with an experience that keeps the individuality of each location while consistently representing our shared values. We want our members to feel like they are at home no matter where they visit. This philosophy is especially important for our Florida-based members who cruise back and forth to the Northeast.

What do you tell young women about the opportunities that exist to grow and lead in the industry?

I think the opportunities are limitless. The growth of women in the industry is something that I've been able to observe firsthand throughout my career. I remember going to one of my first conferences in the marine industry and it was clear that I was outnumbered. Fast forward almost 15 years, and there is a very different picture being painted. I'm proud to say that Safe Harbor is leading the way in eliminating the perception that the marine industry is male-dominated. If a female has a true desire to get up and operate a forklift, Safe Harbor will give her that opportunity.

I also believe women can bring many beneficial qualities to our business. I think women are outstanding transformational leaders. It is in our nature to encourage, inspire, and motivate people to grow, and when we empower other women to focus on their strengths, it lays a foundation for them to define their own role and path toward success. ●