

Captain Deborah Dempsey
2019 Lalonde Award

The 2019 Lalonde "Spirit of the Seas" Award winner is Captain Deborah Dempsey. She comes from community sailing programs on the mouth of the Connecticut River. She is a lifelong professional mariner whose non-traditional career has been documented in film, books, many articles. Captain Dempsey has spent her life contributing to the US Merchant Marine. As a Licensed Deck Officer and Master, as a Columbia River Pilot, a champion and mentor for women in the Merchant Marine, and author of "The Captain's a Woman: Tales of a Merchant Mariner." She recently retired as a pilot on the infamous Columbia River Bar.

Captain Dempsey graduated as valedictorian of her class from Maine Maritime Academy in 1976 and is the first female to graduate from a U.S. maritime or military academy. She is the first American woman to be licensed as a Master Mariner and to command a cargo ship on international voyages, the first woman to become a Columbia River Bar Pilot and the first female regular member of the Council of American Master Mariners.

Before attending Maine Maritime Academy, she had obtained a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Vermont. Captain Dempsey has been a champion and mentor for women in the Merchant Marine. She took more pride in having pursued her goals and having earned the respect of her crew and peers by steadily paying her dues, than for being known as the first female deep sea captain. It was her love of the sea and her profession that propelled her to her achievements.

Captain Dempsey was the only woman among nine ship captains to earn the U.S. Navy's Meritorious Public Service Award during the Persian Gulf War. In January 1993, she rescued a dead ship (M/V LYRA) that had broken away from its tow and was drifting onto North Carolina's Frying Pan Shoals. As a result, Captain Dempsey and her crew received several award, including the United Seaman's Service AOTOS Honored Seamen and a Letter of Commendation from President Clinton. In 1994, Captain Dempsey was awarded an honorary PhD from Maine Maritime Academy for her extraordinary achievements. In 2006, Maine Maritime Academy presented her with its Wall of Honor membership, reserved for distinguished alumni. She became a Columbia River Bar Pilot in 2007.

Captain Dempsey's passion lies in teaching others how to recreate safely on the water leading her to help start the Community Boating Center on Bellingham Bay and she presently serves the Board of Directors as Treasurer. It's been said she has salt water in her veins and is definitely more comfortable afloat than ashore.