

# PADDLING PROVIDES SENSE OF PEACE FOR NEUROSURGEON SEA KAYAKER

By Jon Bell  
For The Scribe

On an ocean kayaking excursion in Alaska last year, a humpback whale surfaced not 40 feet from **Ann-Marie Yost, MD**, a neurosurgeon with Providence Brain and Spine Institute and The Oregon Clinic. On another similar trip Yost and her husband were on earlier – her first one in Alaska – the kayakers had to ride the tide to get into a scenic area near some amazing glaciers. There was glacial ice all around, pristine water and the occasional seal peeking about.



ANN-MARIE  
YOST, MD

"It was so beautiful. Just incredible," Yost said. "I actually started to tear up. I told my husband, 'If I die right now, I'm good.'"

Yost returned from that trip safe, sound, refreshed and ready to get back to her day job as a specialist in brain and spine tumors, peripheral nerve surgery, complex spine surgery and lumbar disc replacement. That feeling, that escape from the demands of neurosurgery, is part of what initially drew Yost to sea kayaking several years ago.

"One of the reasons I have loved kayaking is because it's so peaceful," she said. "You are so connected to the water and away from everything. You leave your phone behind and just get out on the water, close to the wildlife."

Yost, who grew up in Connecticut, said she knew from an early age that she wanted to be a neurosurgeon, despite the fact that no one in her family up to that point had even gone to college. She earned a bachelor's degree in history and sociology of science at the University of Pennsylvania, then, not able to shake her calling toward medicine, headed to med school at George Washington University.

"I think it puzzled a lot of people when I applied to med school because I was a first-generation college kid," she said.

After earning her medical degree, Yost did a general surgery internship at George Washington University and a residence in neurological surgery from 1992 to 1998. She also trained in the Department of Neurological Surgery at the University of Virginia and, more recently, at Newcastle General Hospital in Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom.

Prior to landing in Portland five years ago, Yost first worked at a hospital in Yakima, Wash. But when that nonprofit hospital was purchased by a for-profit entity, Yost headed to another facility in New Mexico. When the work environment changed at that hospital, Yost headed north to Portland and has been here ever since.

Throughout her schooling Yost

dabbled in other specialty areas, but she never found one that attracted her as much as neurosurgery. "Everything else just didn't seem like any fun to me," she said. "Nothing else really caught my attention."

For Yost, the variation of neurosurgery is one of its main draws. She may have a brain tumor surgery one day, while the next brings a lumbar disc herniation or a carpal tunnel procedure. "You're not doing the same thing over and over," Yost said.

Neurosurgery also, at least from an outsider's perspective, would seem to be a very high-stakes and stressful operation. Yost said it is – "Certainly for the cranial stuff," she said – but she also enjoys the challenge of figuring out the problems and working with patients toward a solution. She said it's interesting to see how different patients approach neurosurgery.

"People with brain tumors often have a better perspective about it in general," Yost said, "whereas people with back pain feel like the stakes are higher and bring more expectations."

In part to help balance the demands of her neurosurgeon's life, Yost is also very into martial arts, including Kali, a form of Filipino martial arts, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. She said she practices those in part for physical fitness, but there's more to it than that.

"I find it calming and centering in the same way that the kayaking is," Yost said. "You're focused on a goal and just trying to accurately hit something. They're very similar."

Yost first took to kayaking on a few informal paddles during trips to Victoria, British Columbia. When she moved to Portland, she ended up close to the Willamette River and started kayaking regularly.

"The more I did it, the more I wanted to do it," Yost said.

After enjoying the Willamette, Yost gradually started making more advanced trips on the Columbia River and then to Alaska. To help her gain even more confidence and prepare for trips that might require navigating ocean surf or rough waters, Yost also started kayaking in ocean waves.

"It's fun to learn how to play in the waves," she said. "You treat it like surfing, but it's good for building your skills. It's about being comfortable in the water."

An avid camper, hiker and reader, Yost said she plans to get out on the Willamette more regularly this winter to build up her kayaking endurance. She has a few dream trips on her list, including paddling the Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the west coast of British Columbia. At the top of her list? Antarctica.

"I'm hoping to do the Haida Gwaii next year," Yost said, "but Antarctica may have to wait a little bit." ■

Ann-Marie Yost, MD,  
says kayaking and martial arts  
help balance the demands of  
her work as a neurosurgeon.

Photo courtesy of Ann-Marie Yost



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