

# Neighbors of the **Russian River Valley**

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## *Skipping Stones and Second Lives: Dave Pelzer Returns to the River*



POWERED BY



Cover Photo: Jessica Collins Photography





*Dave Pelzer in his home office surrounded by his cherished memories.*

# Skipping Stones and Second Lives: Dave Pelzer Returns to the River

BY CATHERINE HUGHES | PHOTOS BY JESSICA COLLINS PHOTOGRAPHY

To meet author and Guerneville resident Dave Pelzer, you would never know that he was a victim of child abuse in his formative years. Charming, witty, and full of personal statements like “life is about living a good adventure to tell a good story.”

And stories he’s got.

Born in Daly City in the 1960s among the cookie-cutter track houses perched against the backdrop of the San Bruno Mountains, Dave is the son of a San Francisco firefighter and a stay-at-home mom. Dave’s family looked like they were living the American Dream to the outside world. And maybe it was - for a short while - until it wasn’t.

Dave adored his father, once a brave firefighter who, through a series of life choices, became homeless and disconnected from his family. Dave’s mom was emotionally unstable and abusive, which he chronicles in his #1 International Best-Selling book, “A Child Called It,” and touches on it again in his recent book, “Return to the River.”

Dave survived his childhood with the help of other adults. He can cite numerous stories about teachers who helped him succeed and a favorite teacher who really saw him. “Thanks to the help from a beloved teacher who under-

stood what was happening to me, I was pulled from my home and placed in Foster Care at age 12.” Dave pauses as if thinking of her.

When Dave was 18, he joined the US Air Force. As an aircrew member, Dave played a significant role in Operations Just Cause, Desert Shield, and Desert Storm. He is proud of his military service and its role in teaching him discipline and direction. As a veteran, he wanted to do more, to be more, so while serving in the Air Force, Dave worked in juvenile hall and other programs involving “youth at risk” throughout California. What happened to Dave in childhood directed the rest of his life, a life spent searching for ways to help others.

Although he admits, a life spent helping others hasn’t always helped his personal relationships. Now twice divorced, he is conscious of the mistakes he’s made. He has one son, Stephen, whom he lovingly gushes about, along with his daughter-in-law, Cyndel, and his adored grandson bearing his name, who is his everything.

Dave will tell you that his early experiences fueled his future work, life’s passions, and his insatiable appetite for adventure. Dave quotes Jack London when discussing his life, “The proper function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.”





Dave enjoys the comforts of his cozy home nestled under the redwoods in Guerneville.

It is said that there are two kinds of people in the world – those who run away from danger and those who run towards it. Young children often fall into the first group, while first responders, veterans, and middle-school teachers fall in the second. Many writers also run towards danger, even if it’s only mentally, through classics like Treasure Island. Searching for adventure is how writers live. Dave is all of these identities rolled into one: first responder, veteran, adventurer, lover of the classics, and prolific writer. He also finds time to be a child abuse prevention services adviser, along with his many other accomplishments.

All of it combined is what makes Dave: Dave Pelzer. Rather than dwell on his negative life challenges, Dave focuses on the life-affirming elements, especially his cherished memories of his dad and the times spent together on Johnson’s Beach in Guerneville.

In the 1960s, the Russian River was a popular getaway spot for San Francisco firefighters and police officers. Dave remembers every detail of those summer vacation trips to Guerneville with his family. He describes the thrill of seeing the three-steel rigid-connected trusses of the Guerneville Bridge as they came into view. How suddenly, tall redwoods seemed to swallow everything around them, and the sounds of a river town would suddenly fill the air. It was like a salve for his young spirit. Russian River was like no place he’d ever seen.

“Our family Impala station wagon would be loaded on top, bottom, and sideways. It was like a floating device... and I was like a little dog pressed up against the window. I will never forget

when we’d make that turn-off on 116 and that bridge! I would exclaim, ‘Oh my God! There’s Pee Wee Golf! Oh my God! There’s J’s with the super slide! Oh, oh my God!’” Dave laughs.

Those summer days spent on Johnson’s Beach made lasting impressions, especially the river swims with his dad and searches with his brothers for the flattest, smoothest river rocks to skip the farthest. In Dave’s mind, the river consisted of happy people enjoying the outdoors, floating along riverbanks, splashing in the water, kids filling the arcade, racing the go-carts, and families and friends hanging out together, eating, drinking, and laughing.

From his first encounter with the Russian River, Dave felt that he had to find a way to live in such a place. But Dave’s adventurous adult life spent traveling and speaking in front of audiences worldwide took him far away from the idyllic river place that captured his imagination. Only his memories of Johnson’s Beach would have to be enough to carry him through the difficult moments in his life.

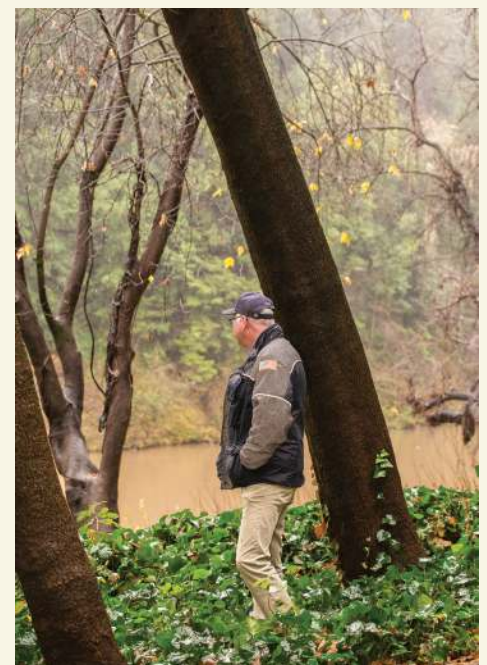
Ignored dreams have a way of nagging us as we age. After a painful second divorce, Dave decided it was time to make some changes. He needed a place to heal. He had to return to the river, and he came to this life-affirming realization at the start of the pandemic when river homes were difficult to find. He settled in Guerneville in 2021, where he wrote his latest book, “Return to the River.” Dave connected with local Guerneville painter Nan Still to create his book cover—Johnson’s Beach, 1966, his favorite time at the river.

These days, Dave’s idea of adventure is spending more time with his grandson, teaching him to skip stones across the river amongst the unspoiled beauty of the hillsides. He also enjoys expanding his "obsession" with indoor plants. Dave admits, “God, I know I am a Botanical nightmare, but there’s a gentleman at Safeway who is such a dear man, Patrick, who puts up with me, helps me, and always points out the latest arrivals. Everybody’s very kind to me there.”

Scientific studies have stated that being near water is crucial for attaining an enduring sense of happiness. It’s what draws people to the Russian River. It’s where Dave has returned to find the peace he craves and face whatever adventure is just around the corner.



Dave’s gear and mementos from a lifetime of community service.



Dave stands by the River that inspires his journey.