

# Ahoy, Matey! It's a Pirate's Life

*A Halloween costume contest created a new livelihood and new lifestyle for Jeff MacKay*

*By Lori Russell*

**W**hen Jeff MacKay donned a wig and his homemade hat for a Halloween party four years ago, he did not know much about pirates. He just wanted to win a costume contest.

Since then, piracy has become both his livelihood and his lifestyle.

Pirate fever swept the country in the summer of 2003 after the release of the first of Disney's swashbuckling adventures, "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl."

Jeff found his alter ego in the devilish, witty and charming character of Captain Jack Sparrow.

As he designed his costume that October, the pieces began to fall into place, including a pair of boots purchased online from the man who supplied the pirate footwear for the movie starring Johnny Depp.

Only one piece eluded him: an

authentic looking pirate hat.

"I'd done theater work in the past—acting and stagecraft—so I decided to make my own," Jeff says.

Jeff's costume not only took home top honors in the Halloween contest. It changed his life.

"I sent photos of myself to the boot maker, and he wrote back asking where I bought my hat," Jeff recalls. "When I told him I'd made it, he suggested I sell them on eBay."

Though Jeff had never made a hat before his debut as Captain Jack, his handcrafted creations quickly became a hit with pirate re-enactors and enthusiasts looking for an authentic product.

"Last year, I sold just under 1,000 hats," says the former windsurf shop manager.

He now gets letters from customers who proudly wear their purchases with street clothes.

"People are wearing pirate hats like baseball caps," Jeff says.

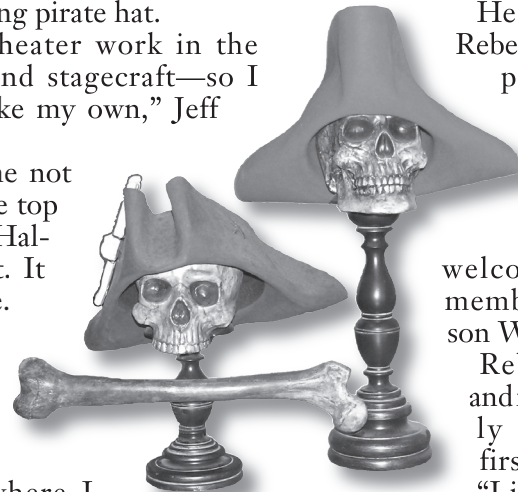
Each pirate hat takes three days to complete. Jeff offers 11 styles in wool felt, sea grass, straw and cashmere, with a choice of colors, finishes and details, including a bullet hole created by the pirate's own pistol.

Prices range from \$75 to more than \$200.

Even with five to 20 hats in production at a time, there is an eight-week wait for each order.

Creations by "The MacKay," as he is known, will be featured in the independent film, "Pirates of the Great Salt Lake," by director E.R. Nelson, to be released this summer.

A new career was not the only thing that came Jeff MacKay's way when he stepped into the role of Captain Jack Sparrow that Halloween night four years ago.



He also met his wife, Rebecca—a woman with plenty of her own "piratittude."

The couple wed two years ago in a pirate ceremony, and welcomed the newest member of their crew, son Wilde, last year.

Rebecca—an author and illustrator—recently completed her first children's book, "Little Pirate and His Pirate Hat." She plans

to add three more to the series.

The MacKays have started a third business designing and selling handcrafted, pirate-themed furniture online for adults and children, including tables, toy chests, rocking horses and high chairs.

Their pirate lifestyle does not end when they finish work.

The couple—who make their home port in The Dalles—design their own period clothing and gather at re-enactments with like-minded buccaneers to shoot black powder pistols, heave axes, fight with swords and fire cannons.

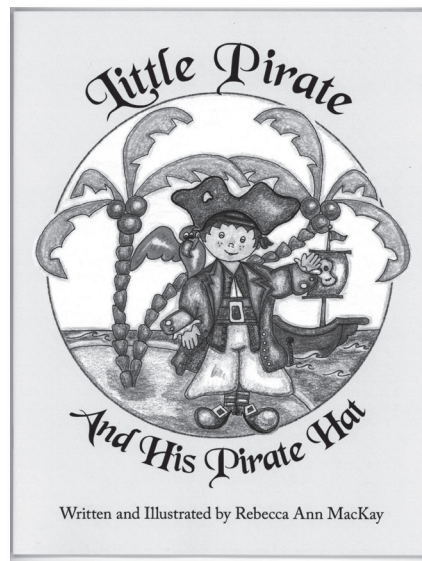
"I play a pirate, not a wench," says Rebecca. "I want the same equality as the men have."

Jeff grins.

"She's pretty good with a boarding ax," he notes.

Jeff dresses as Captain Jack Sparrow for various events, including the opening of the movie, "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End," in Hood River. In April, he traveled to New Orleans, where he played the good captain at Pyratecon—the first indoor pirate convention in the United States.

Pirate festivals—once common just in port cities along the East Coast—are drawing re-enactors, vendors and enthusiasts to events around the country. The second annual Portland Pirate Festival,





*Left, Rebecca and Jeff MacKay dressed in period costume. Photo courtesy of the MacKays. Opposite page, Jeff's handmade hat stands and hats, and the cover of Rebecca's first children's book.*

September 22-23 in Cathedral Park, is a family-friendly event expected to draw 20,000 people.

The MacKays say the lure of the pirate life is the freedom it offers, the right to choose what they are going to do regardless of the outcome.

"Piracy was a true form of democracy," explains Jeff. "Every man on the ship had a vote, and the captain

could be replaced at any time. Each member of the crew had an equal share of the control and the bounty."

Piracy flourished during the late 17th to early 18th century in the Caribbean, also known as the Spanish Main. The "Golden Age of Piracy" began when Queen Elizabeth gave some of her best sailors permission to raid enemy ships

and ports in honor of England.

Privateers such as Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake and Captain William Kidd soon found how easy it was to loot and plunder, and chose to keep their booty by becoming pirates.

During this time, the British Royal Navy used a practice called "impressment"—forcing unwilling, though able-bodied men, into naval service. Life was hard aboard ship, where crews were fed poorly, frequently suffered from disease or injury, and often died young. Rather than remain in servitude, some men mutinied and turned to piracy.

Pirates adhered to their own code of conduct, which determined behavior, how the plunder was divided and how crew members were to be punished when rules were broken.

"Pirates were also among the first to offer hazard pay," says Jeff. "They compensated a man for the loss of an eye, an arm or a leg."

What do their non-pirate friends think about their lifestyle?

Rebecca laughs.

"They have all converted," she says. "They're wearing pirate T-shirts and listening to pirate music. Even our Web designer wears a pirate hat."

"When I see people who know me, they come up and say, 'I wish I could find my niche. I wish I had your lifestyle,'" says Jeff. "I'm married, we have a baby and three pirate businesses. It's all thanks to Johnny Depp and Pirates of the Caribbean." ■

*Readers interested in claiming their own piece of the pirate life can find more information on the MacKays at [www.jackshats.com](http://www.jackshats.com), [www.littlepiratebooks.com](http://www.littlepiratebooks.com) and [www.thepiratefurniture.com](http://www.thepiratefurniture.com).*