

# Powerboat

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# BORN TO RUN

ADVANTAGE'S DEBBIE CHRISTENSEN ISN'T JUST LIVING—SHE'S INHALING LIFE.

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**D**EBBIE CHRISTENSEN DRIVES HER WHITE Jaguar down a one-lane road on the outskirts of Lake Havasu City, Ariz. Along with a photographer and a writer, the 54-year-old head of Advantage Boats is scouting locations for an evening photo shoot. As she negotiates the turns in the road, she talks about the turns her life has taken. And she describes how those turns taught her to appreciate and—to some extent—live in every moment.

“You can’t do anything about what happened yesterday—it’s gone,” she says. “And who knows if tomorrow is going to come? Look at 9/11. Look at all those people who died. All their tomorrows didn’t come, and that could happen to any of us any time.”

“I think the realization of that is what has happened to me, what has changed me,” she continues. “Harry was here one day and gone the next. Jeff was here one day and gone the next. So why not live for right now?”

Harry was Debbie’s husband. Jeff was Debbie’s son. Within eight months of one another in 1999, both died violently. Harry was murdered. Jeff was killed in a boat-racing accident. Debbie was left to run the family business.

A lover of all things mechanical, Harry Christensen earned his pilot's license in the mid-1980s. By the early 1990s, the success of Advantage Boats was such that he was able to purchase a twin-engine Cessna 340. Near the end of 1998, he purchased a faster, twin-turbo-prop Cheyenne aircraft, and he decided to sell the Cessna.

When Harry and Debbie returned from a trip to San Jose del Cabo near the tip of Baja California for New Year's 1999, they learned that a man named Bobby Joe Keesee had expressed serious interest in buying the Cessna. What they didn't know was that Keesee, a career criminal, had a history of stealing aircraft. They also didn't know was that by just being in Arizona, Keesee, who had been in and out of prison since he was 18 years old, was violating the terms of his parole in California.

On Jan. 6, 1999, Harry Christensen left his house in the early morning to meet Keesee at his hotel and finalize the sale of the Cessna back at the Advantage plant. But neither Christensen nor Keesee ever arrived at Advantage, and by 3 p.m. that day Debbie was worried enough to call Jeff, who had moved to Lake Havasu City just a few days earlier to rejoin the family business. Together, they drove out to the hangars where the aircraft were stored.

"The Cheyenne was in the big hangar, and the 340 was supposed to be in the hangar next to it," Debbie says. "Harry's Jeep was pulled in front of the first hangar. The keys were still hanging in the ignition. Harry's flight bag and everything were still in the Jeep. Jeff opened the hangar and the 340 was not there. I think Jeff immediately knew something was wrong."

The Cessna was discovered later that day on a tiny airfield in Albuquerque, N.M., the city from which Keesee had called several times before coming to Lake Havasu City to see the airplane.

There was blood in the back of the aircraft, but Harry Christensen was not to be found.

Four months later, an Albuquerque rancher riding his fence lines found Christensen's body. He'd been shot twice. Keesee was convicted of Christensen's murder, as well as air piracy, and was given two life sentences.

During the four-month search for Christensen's body, Debbie found waiting at home for a phone call intolerable. So she went back to work at Advantage. Jeff joined her as planned, and the company's employees, always close-knit, became an extended family.

Once his body was found, Harry's funeral provided a measure of closure, but it did not bring much peace. Especially for 30-year-old Jeff Christensen.

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"After Harry died, Jeff was pissed at the world," Debbie says. "He never had peace with it—he was still fighting it. One night we were out on my patio and he picked up one of my chairs and threw it. I yelled at him for throwing my patio furniture."

Debbie laughs hard at the memory. Then her eyes and voice soften.

"I do remember one thing Jeff did after he threw that chair," she says. "He said, 'Mom, don't worry, I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you.'"

Jeff Christensen didn't get the chance to make good on his pledge. Almost four months to the day after his father's funeral, he and his

brother-in-law, Mike Porter, were ejected from their race boat during an offshore race in Pittsburg, Calif. Porter walked away with minor injuries, but Christensen's spinal cord was severed when he struck the water. The following day, he was taken off life support, and his organs were donated.

"When everything happened with me in 1999 and into 2000, I wasn't sure where I was going or what I was doing," Debbie says. "Those are like two years that are lost to me. Ray (Camaro) is the person who kept Advantage going, he really did. He had never been in the boat business, but he's a businessman to the T, so he just came aboard and took over. Slowly, I started coming back."

Debbie Christensen couldn't have prepared for the events of 1999—no one could—yet in a way she'd been preparing for them all her life. The daughter of firefighter Bud Knight and his wife, Daphne, she grew up in California's 29 Palms, a stark high-desert town near Palm Springs, as the middle child between two high-spirited brothers. More than occasionally, she found herself on the receiving end of boyish fun. She became a tough kid.

"I can remember all the things my brothers did to me," she says, and laughs. "I remember once they caught this big snake, a red racer, and wrapped it around my neck. I'll never forget that one. I've got a scar between my eyes from where one of my brothers threw a stick at me. But we did things together, too. We used to go rabbit hunting and then hang them on the clothesline and wait for the coyotes to get them."

By the time Debbie was 17, she had a new surname and a baby boy named Jeff. She left high school and became a full-time mother, having a girl, Jennifer, three years later. Not long after they moved to the "big city" of Santa Ana, Calif. For the next 10 years, she stayed at home and raised the children, while Harry worked for RJ Noble Company, an asphalt business in near-by Anaheim.



From left: In August, Scott Driesbach became Debbie Christensen's partner in Advantage Boats. Driesbach, who was one of her son Jeff's friends, grew close to Debbie after the tragedies that took her husband Harry, left, and Jeff, right, in a span of eight months.

When Harry started Fiberglass Concepts, Debbie went to work part time managing the office. The company built fiberglass fenders for Competitive Trailers, branched into fiberglass repair work and eventually started building small hulls for Bonner Boats. When Harry started Advantage Boats in 1982, Debbie became the company's full-time office manager.

"Harry shared everything about the business with her, so she had the opportunity to learn everything about it," says Camaro, who became an investor and silent partner in Advantage Boats a few years after the company started. "She really understands the boat business—technically she's very knowledgeable about it. She knows what it takes to build a boat. She just knows it, and that's helped her."

By all accounts, Debbie and Harry Christensen were inseparable. They worked hard and played hard together, and that play included waterskiing and riding dirt bikes with their kids. Harry had one basic, overriding rule: Whatever the activity, everyone had to be self-sufficient.

"My dad raised my mom and I—well he didn't raise my mom but in a way he did—to be very independent," says Jennifer, 34, who is married to Mike Porter and manages the office of Redline Performance, the thriving off-road engine company he founded in Anaheim, Calif. "If you

couldn't change a tire on your car, you couldn't drive it. If you couldn't change an air filter on your motorcycle, you couldn't ride it. My mom had always been very independent in her own way, but she kind of took a backseat to my dad because the attention was always on him."

Among the backseats Debbie took was on Harry's custom-painted Harley-Davidson Hardtail motorcycle. But those days are gone. Now she rides her own Harley.

A few years back, Debbie Christensen found herself in her garage, staring at the multi-colored Harley her husband had cherished. Harry received the motorcycle—in the form of a frame and a box of pieces—from a customer who owed him money, and he had the bike reassembled and painted. Harry and Debbie started riding together.

Now Harry was gone, but the Harley was still there.

"I thought, 'You know, I can do this,'" she says. "And if I can't, what am I going to do? I'm probably just going to drop it and scratch the paint. I had ridden dirt bikes before, but never on the street. So I rode down my driveway and up to my girlfriend's house. I was petrified. I stayed there a little while before I rode home.

"When I got to the bottom of the driveway—I have this really steep driveway—I looked up and said, 'There's no way I'm going to drive it up,'" she continues. "I called my friend, and he

drove it up for me. But from that point I just started riding it."

A few days later, one of Jeff's friends, Scott Driesbach, with whom Debbie had grown close with after the tragedies, adjusted the bike to fit her. Debbie began riding with Driesbach and others in Lake Havasu City, eventually taking the Harley on a 600-mile tour through Arizona.

"By the time I got home from that trip, I was done," she says, and laughs, and her laugh becomes girlish. "I was more than done. I never realized what a hard bike it was to ride until I bought another bike, a Heritage Softail. It's a lot bigger bike, but a lot easier to ride. The handlebars are wider, it's easier to turn and it has rear suspension."

Driesbach, 34, used to import stuffed toys from China. In August, he became Debbie's partner after Camaro decided to retire and sell his stake in the company. Camaro asked Debbie if she wanted to sell the company. It took her all of two minutes to decide she didn't and she asked him to help her find a new partner. They approached Driesbach and, after sleeping on it for a night, he signed on.

Debbie Christensen and Scott Driesbach remain close. They still ride Harleys together and hit the dunes in their respective buggies with friends, most of whom are a lot closer to his age than hers.

Why mostly younger friends? Simple—they have the energy to keep up with her.

"First, she's still a young lady," Driesbach says. "Second, she's very young at heart."

Porter, Debbie's son-in-law, agrees. "She likes to play hard," he says. "She's usually the last one to go to bed and the first one up. I have a hard time keeping up with her." continued—>

Under the leadership of Debbie Christensen, Advantage Boats has more models than ever.





**R**einventing yourself is never easy. Debbie Christensen struggled to find her way after the deaths of Harry and Jeff. Psychiatry proved worthless to her. Talking with Driesbach helped, immersing herself in the business of running Advantage helped even more. And yet it was a local support group for women who'd lost children that best helped her grow strong and find new joy and meaning in her life.

"They say when something like this (the deaths of Harry and Jeff) happens you'll never be the same," she explains. "I am a different person now. What my level of normal is—it's a new normal. Old normal was going home, fixing dinner, cleaning up. You just get into such a routine. Now I don't have a routine. I do things as I want to do them, as they come.

"I married Harry when I was 16, and I never did anything by myself," she continues. "I never traveled by myself, never went out to dinner by myself. Now I do all those things, and it's changed me. It's made me a different person. So my new normal is the new me, I guess."

At her house in San Jose del Cabo, not far from Cabo San Lucas, the new Debbie Christensen often heads into the nearby mountains solo in her Jeep for an afternoon of off-roading. She admits that it's probably not the

safest thing to do alone, but adds that she's comfortable with it.

"I take more chances now because I don't know if I'm going to be here tomorrow," she says.

On her last trip to Mexico, the new Debbie Christensen went marlin fishing for the first time since she started going there with her husband 16 years ago. She bought her own place there in 2003.

"You know, I've been around boats my whole life," she says. "To do that and catch marlin, that was just fun."

Meanwhile, Advantage thrives. When she's there, Debbie Christensen can be, at any given moment, the hardest-working person in the building. The company is producing more boats now, and has more models and more employees than ever.

"Debbie has picked up right where Harry left off," says Bob Sepulveda, director of sales and marketing for Advantage. "Of course, they worked together for so many years and she learned so much from him. She has the ball and she's not going to give it up."

Gary Ferguson, Advantage's chief designer, agrees. "She's almost a duplicate of Harry—they both had the same terminologies and their thinking is about the same," he says. "She's the driving force behind this company. I don't know

how anyone could put up with all the stuff that's gone on in her life, but somehow she's managed and been really super through all of it."

That same sentiment is echoed by Bob Leach, owner of Eliminator Boats and a longtime Christensen family friend who describes her as "an incredible woman," and engine builder Bob Teague of Teague Custom Marine, who calls her "analytical, classy and tough." At the same time, former Advantage partner Camaro says she is the "kindest, softest person" he knows.

All of those qualities coexist now in one driven woman. All are obvious to even the most casual acquaintance.

"I consider myself a survivor," she says. "If I can survive everything that happened, I can survive anything. Don't get me wrong, I still have my bad days—just being able to talk about it without crying is pretty good.

"But I think knowing that this is what Harry would want me to do keeps me going. I think he would be extremely proud of what I've accomplished. I'm not belittling myself, but I am who I am, and I know what I know about the business because of Harry.

"I was with him from the time I was 16, and he molded my life. I believe I am the strong person I am because of him, and I believe that he would want me to keep going with the business."

She is silent for a moment. Then she starts to laugh. She says, "And then sometimes I think he would say, 'What are you, crazy? Sell the place and go enjoy yourself.'"

Another day, perhaps. Debbie Christensen is still busy living this one. **P**

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