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For the Sharks

How a Woodlands attorney feeds his love for the predators of the sea.

ABOUT THREE HOURS BY BOAT OFF THE COAST OF GRAND BAHAMA ISLAND is an area of beautiful blue water, just 20 to 30 feet deep, teeming with hundreds of sharks. The most prominent of these species, the tigers, give the spot its name—Tiger Beach—and are why Paul Spielvogel dives here several times a year. While most humans are perfectly content walking the land and occasionally venturing into the sky, Spielvogel was made for the sea.

Spielvogel, who practices real estate law and is a fee attorney for American Title Co. in the Woodlands, has been diving with and photographing sharks for about 11 years. Unlike many people who venture beneath the ocean's surface to come face-to-face with these big fish, Spielvogel is part of a small community of divers that uses no cage or protective barrier. Much of his work is featured in *Shark Diver Magazine*, to which he also serves as general counsel, and he has been interviewed on Discovery Channel's popular Shark Week. His most famous "high-five shark" photograph has been featured on *Inside Edition* and *People Magazine* online. While Spielvogel enjoys being a lawyer, he is happiest underwater and—much to his employees' displeasure—has decorated his office with shark photography to remind him of his true passion. "It's become my world, my obsession," he said. "It's more fun than practicing law, that's for sure."

Growing up in New York, Spielvogel didn't always know how great a life in the water could be. Then when he was 14, his family moved to live near Pompano Beach, Florida. "Where I came from in New York, the water was cold and rocky and you couldn't see anything," he said. "Florida was the first time I ever saw blue water. It was amazing to me. I felt like I was in my natural element. I never wanted to get out of the water."

In 1973, the same year he got his driver's license, Spielvogel became a certified scuba diver. But it wasn't until 2002 that his interest in shark diving and photography really took off. On a trip with *Shark Diver Magazine*, he snapped a great white photograph using a point-and-shoot camera. "The magazine published that shot, and it changed me right then and there," said Spielvogel.

Now Spielvogel goes on anywhere from four to eight diving trips a year for *Shark Diver Magazine*, most often to Tiger Beach, but also to places like Mexico's Guadalupe Island. Depending on the location and the shark species, these excursions take place just minutes or up to several hours from the coast, and the divers go down anywhere from 20 to 45 feet under water. When the boat gets to its desired location, Spielvogel puts his Canon EOS 7D in a piece of equipment called an underwater housing unit and slips in the water.

Once situated, he tunes in so that he will realize when he's in the right place at the right time for the perfect shot. "I will get closer to the sharks than a lot of people might, some right in their faces. The closer you are to the animal, the better your picture is going to be."

Maintaining that sharks are not as dangerous as most laypersons think, Spielvogel never gets scared when he dives. He does insist that divers respect the underwater animals and environment, and a "buddy system" is recommended to keep an eye out for any sneaking-up sharks. "The sharks' job is to be the cleanup crew of the ocean," said Spielvogel. "If there's a decay, they're going to be right on it. If there's fish in the water, then that's what they eat. Human beings are not on their dinner menu. There aren't very many shark attacks in the world—there really aren't." According to Spielvogel, most people are injured by sharks in shallow, murky waters where the shark senses something moving but can't see what it is. Spielvogel and many in the shark diving and conservation communities aim to break down the myth of danger and safeguard shark populations. "They are an important part of the ecosystem and a balance to the waters," he said. "Their destruction commercially and out of fear is pure ignorance and stupidity."

While he's passionate about his uncommon hobby, Spielvogel encourages other lawyers to find any kind of balance in work and play. "We wake up one day and find that we worked our whole life. The work provides the money that's necessary to not only feed the family but to take these types of trips. It doesn't have to be shark diving. It's just something that's an escape—whatever floats your boat, then you do it." LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

To see some of Spielvogel's shark photos, go to texasbar.com/sharks.

Creative Carvings

A San Antonio attorney's award-winning art celebrates nature.

FOR MORE THAN 35 YEARS, MARCUS ROGERS HAS BEEN SHAPING PIECES OF WOOD INTO ELABORATE WORKS OF ART. His muse? Birds. With fine feather detailing and carefully selected hues of paint, his fowl-inspired carvings look like the real deal.

"It's something that I do to try to reflect the beauty of God's creation," said Rogers, owner of the Law Offices of Marcus P. Rogers in San Antonio.

Inspired by sketches of duck decoys that hung in a conference room at his then-office, Rogers decided to give wood carving a try in 1978, first using a hunting knife to craft a broadbill drake decoy. When he found out that his former Waco high school football coach, John Vasek, had the same hobby, the two connected, and Vasek introduced Rogers to the practice of "feather burning," a technique that uses a hot knife to mark each hair of a feather. One mallard hen later and Rogers had learned a detailing method that continues to make his pieces more realistic and eventually earned him a place among top contestants in national-level carving competitions.

Rogers prefers to carve his creatures, ideally birds of prey, on a life-size scale. Working with solid blocks of clear-grained tupelo wood, which he describes as dense but soft, Rogers says he can log anywhere from 500 to 1,000 hours in the shop to produce some of his larger carvings, like kestrels and golden eagles.

"It's like a respite," said Rogers. "I find that time passes very quickly."

Rogers has developed a favored approach to the carving process. First, he envisions the final piece by imagining

the attitude of the bird, considering factors such as how the feet and wings will be positioned and in which direction the neck will be tilted.

"I really don't do a lot of drawing or measuring or even making clay models," said Rogers. "I feel blessed because I can visualize the shape of the bird that's locked inside the wood."

After removing large chunks with a band saw, Rogers works the piece down to a smaller section, meticulously grinding away wood to highlight plumage and other delicate features, using specialized equipment, including dental tools with tiny diamond tips. Finally, he adds a coat of oil paint, a medium he also enjoys using to create landscapes on canvas.

To date, Rogers has produced more than 50 bird carvings, several of which can be found in his law office. Word of mouth has helped many to be sold or presented to admirers around the nation, including a single owl's feather, now in the personal collection of the trustee of the Autry Natural Center in Los Angeles, California. His works also are displayed during carving competitions, where entries are judged on technique, artistry, and anatomy, among other criteria. Over the years, Rogers has won numerous awards in the professional division of the Louisiana Wildfowl Carving Competition, and in 2012, he took home an honorable mention in the "Birds of Prey" category at the Ward World Championship Wildfowl Carving Competition in Maryland. He also provides carving classes during retreats at Laity Lodge, a faith-centered camp on the Frio River in the Hill Country.

Rogers is now focused on creating art for his own enjoyment and to share with family—including his five kids and six grandchildren. He's wrapping up a replica of a cedar waxwing and hopes to soon start another peregrine falcon.

"Wood burning is tedious and takes hours and hours," he explained. "So I've got to get busy." *HANNAH KIDDOO*

TEXAS PEOPLE



Mary Anne Wiley

Office of the Governor,
Austin

Appointed general counsel to the Office of the Governor by Gov. Rick Perry.



Benny Agosto Jr.

Abraham, Watkins, Nichols, Sorrels,
Agosto & Friend, Houston

Recognized as a HIPGiver by Hispanics in Philanthropy.



John G. Browning

Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith,
Dallas

Received the 2014 Burton Award for Distinguished Achievement in Legal Writing.



Faith S. Johnson

Faith Johnson and Associates,
Irving

Appointed to the Public Safety Commission of the Texas Department of Public Safety by Gov. Rick Perry.