

Diving for ancient shark teeth



Bill Eberlein with one of his Megalodon teeth

Image: Penn State Behrend

Alumnus turns hobby into profitable business

One of the most fascinating things about a human life is how it often unfolds in a series of serendipitous events that lead to unexpected twists and turns.

When Bill Eberlein '89 arrived at Penn State Behrend in the late 1980s, he planned to pursue a career in accounting. After taking a few economics classes, he discovered he loved economics, so he majored in that, too. Thirty years later, after a long, successful career in information technology, he now makes a (good) living diving for and selling ancient shark teeth through his business, Megateeth Fossils.

So how does one go from accounting and economics to IT to fossil dealer?

The first twist for Eberlein came when he was 21 and working part-time at Sears, where a coworker talked him into taking a free scuba diving lesson. He loved it. Before long he was spending his free time with local dive club members exploring the waters around Erie. He even joined the Erie County Sheriff's Office Scuba Team.

"I really loved looking for shipwrecks in Lake Erie," he said. "And there was plenty of opportunity to dive in Erie. If you had gear, you could join in a free dive every weekend."

Ten years later, Eberlein moved to Savannah, Georgia, to take a job at Gulfstream Aerospace in information technology. How does an accounting and economics major end up in an IT position? The brief explanation is that he followed his interest and aptitude just as he did in his diving hobby. And when a Gulfstream coworker learned that Eberlein was an avid diver, the coworker told him about diving for shark teeth in the rivers around Savannah.

"My first thought was: 'That's silly, looking for tiny, little shark teeth,'" he said. "I was used to really cool stuff like shipwrecks, you know?" But then he learned that the teeth this coworker hunted for were not run-of-the-mill, one-inch shark teeth you can find in any tourist gift shop along the East Coast, but hefty, palm-size fossils from the ancient Megalodon shark, an extinct species of shark that lived two to five million years ago.

"The Megalodon wasn't just a shark, but a dinosaur shark that was thought to be one of the largest and most powerful predators in the sea," he said.

Scientists estimate that the average Megalodon was 34 feet long with thick, robust teeth built for grabbing prey and breaking bone.

Eberlein was intrigued and he wanted to find a tooth, so he signed up for a charter trip near Hilton Head, South Carolina. The charter crew warned him that it was hard to see something like Megalodon teeth and that he shouldn't be too disappointed if he didn't find any.

He came up with a bagful of them, astonishing the charter captain.

"I was used to diving in dark, murky water and sort of feeling my way around," he said. "I just took my hand and dug down into the silt a little bit, and it wasn't long before I felt a tooth."

Inspired by his early success, Eberlein dove into his new hobby, searching for fossils on weekends and vacation days. Soon he had collected so many that he needed to do something with them.

"I knew there was a market for the teeth and figured I could use the money to pay for my new boat," he said.

His accounting degree came in handy as the profits from Megateeth Fossils paid for Eberlein's boat, and then some. The average whole tooth in good condition sells for about \$100, imperfect small ones for as little as \$20. The most valuable tooth Eberlein has found is worth about \$5,000. He keeps that one for himself, in a safety deposit box.

In 2003, he left Gulfstream to teach classes in information technology and accounting at Savannah Technical College. Five years later, he decided to dive and sell fossils full time.

“My boat captain and I usually head out early in the morning and come back around lunchtime,” he said. “One time, I found more than forty teeth in one hole, but I average about two teeth a dive.”

Rare are the days he comes up empty-handed. But, if he does, Eberlein takes comfort in the fact that he gets to do something he loves almost every day.

“I just remind myself that, for me, my worst day under water is better than my best day sitting behind a desk in an office,” he said.