



LYDIA ELY/THE ASTORIAN

Steerman points at the program she uses to track ships passing through the area.

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and approaching the bar with spreadsheets of schedules. Three radios sit nearby, tuned to channels 9, 13 and 16.

Steerman said the bar pilots provided a good support network as she learned the skills and confidence needed to react quickly during emergencies on one of the most dangerous stretches of water in the world.

“Something kicks in and you can just be calm and just go right with ‘OK, this is what I need to do,’” she said.

Steerman studied maritime archaeology and previously worked for the Merchants Exchange in Portland. She jumped at the chance to apply to the bar pilots when a position opened.

She works for two weeks at a time, rotating the month with another dispatcher. When she’s in Astoria, she lives in a cabin connected with the Columbia River Quarantine Station.

Most of Steerman’s friends and family live in Portland, where she lives during the other half of the month.

During the pandemic, Steerman started a synth pop-punk band, the Golden Skeletons, with some friends in Portland. She sings, plays the guitar and

the keyboard. She hopes to do a show at some point in Astoria, a city that is starting to feel more like home.

“It’s mostly pretty cool actually, to be able to kind of live in both worlds,” she said. “But the more that I do that, the more I realize I want to be here full time. This area calls to me, and there’s a lot of pros to being here.”

Steerman said she has had no issues so far as a woman in a male-dominated industry, aside from sometimes being addressed as “sir” accidentally.

“When I reach out to (ships), sometimes I’ll get a woman captain. And so it’s two females talking to each other, which is pretty rare,” she said. “And there’s always, for a moment, this recognition of, ‘Oh, hey, cool.’”

Steerman is slowly moving more decorations into the dispatcher’s office. For now, her only contribution to a shelf lined with baseball hats and knickknacks is a button that, when pressed, offers advice like a Magic 8-Ball.

She plans on sticking around for a while.

“Oh, they’re gonna have to wheel me out when I’m old and decrepit,” she said, laughing. “I love it here. They’re really good to me. I love the area. I love the industry. Definitely retirement.”



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