


animals voice

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A close-up photograph of a dog, likely a Papillon or similar breed, with large, fringed ears. The dog has a white face with brown patches around its eyes and on its ears. It is lying down, looking directly at the camera with a happy expression, its mouth open and tongue hanging out. The background is plain white.

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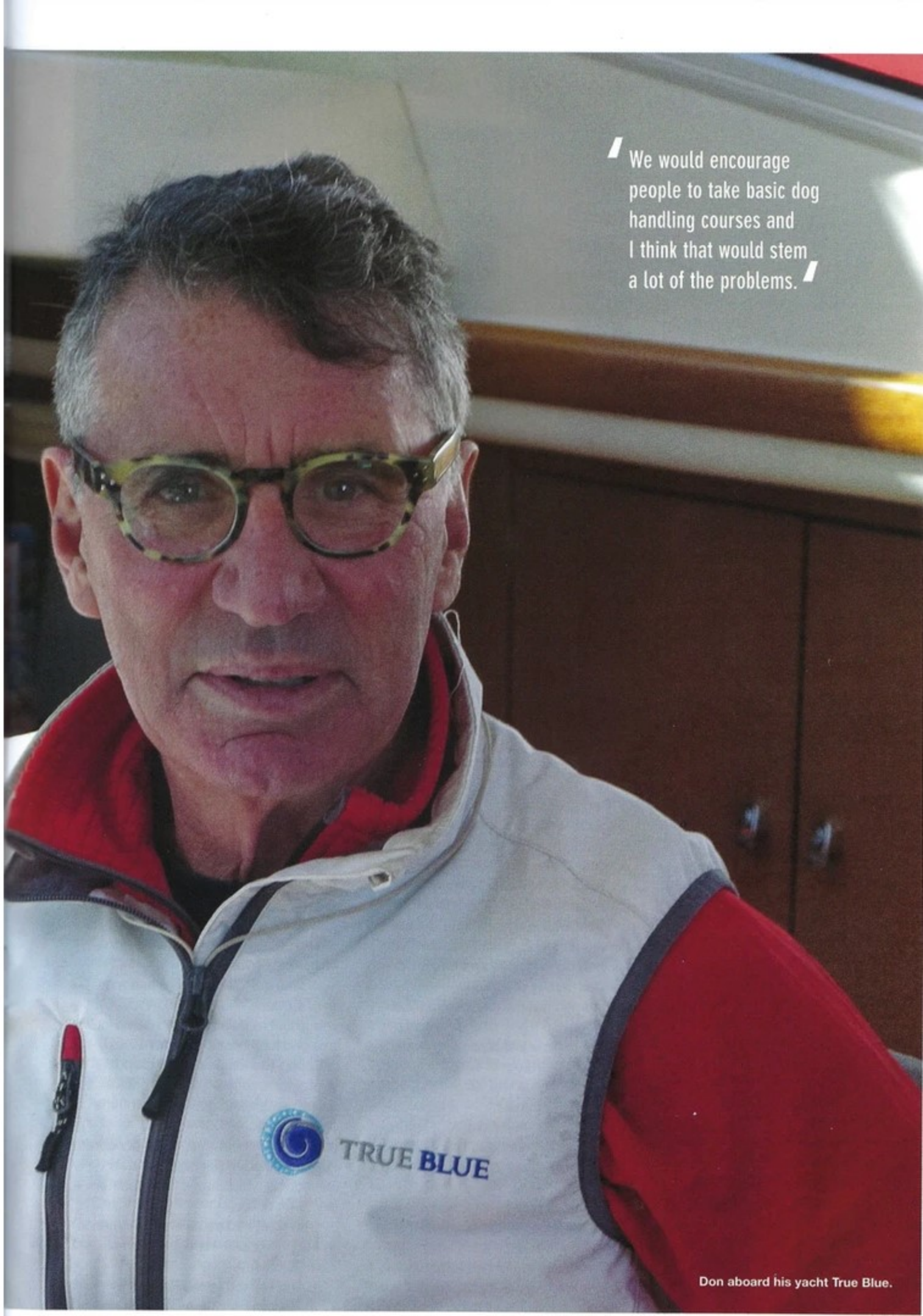
Life before the animal welfare mast

IN AMERICA, plastic surgeon Don Brown performed body contouring surgery on people who'd lost a lot of weight. The animal-loving doctor would ask his patients what they did for exercise and if they did nothing, the next question was always: "Do you have a dog?"

If they didn't, Don would suggest they check out the wonderful dogs at San Francisco's SPCA who needed a home.

Don was a board member at the San Francisco SPCA and would tell his patients: "If you have a dog you have to exercise it. It will do the dog good and it will do you good."

Don is now on the board of SPCA Auckland. He and his wife Leslie moved to New Zealand two years ago – they sailed here from San Francisco – because Don is really a Kiwi. He was ►

A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with short, dark hair and glasses with a yellow and black pattern. He is wearing a white jacket with red accents on the collar and sleeves. The jacket has a blue circular logo with a white swirl and the words "TRUE BLUE" printed on the left chest. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background shows the interior of a yacht with wooden paneling and a white ceiling.

/' We would encourage people to take basic dog handling courses and I think that would stem a lot of the problems. /

Don aboard his yacht True Blue.

► born in Nelson, though he didn't live there long.

Don's father, the youngest of eight children, had come to New Zealand just before World War II to visit family. When war broke out, he enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Air Force and, after his service, met Don's mother.

When Don was 18 months old the family moved to Canada. He now calls himself a Canadian-American-Kiwi and reckons he got his sea legs when he learned to walk on board the ship during the family's voyage to Canada.

Don – who was about to sail to Vanuatu with medical supplies when we spoke – says it might be unscientific, but he thinks the motion on board that ship when he was a baby stood him in good stead: "I don't have problems with seasickness, which is nice."

The family settled in Vancouver and always had dogs. Don remembers getting Buster, a German short-haired pointer, on his sixth birthday.

"I was mad about the dog. He was a great dog. I was a Boy Scout. I remember I trained him. I got a dog handler's badge."

Don went to the University of British Columbia as an undergraduate in science, then to medical school. After that, he went to Los Angeles to intern at the University of California-Irvine, then left to travel the world with a buddy.

Heading off for adventure is not only a New Zealand thing, but also a Canadian thing, he says.

"I think Canadians and New Zealanders love to travel because wherever you go, exotic places, you always find a Canadian or a Kiwi."

After the travel, he went to San Francisco and spent a year doing general surgery at the California Pacific Medical Centre. Then he went to Cornell in New York where he did hip, neck, ear, nose and throat surgery – before heading off travelling again.

Don loves adventures and he sure has had a few, such as in Borneo where he ventured far up into the country's headwaters – a feat that got him elected to the Explorers Club in New York.



Don and Leslie with Hans at a San Francisco SPCA fund-raising event.

Don's brother, who is also a plastic surgeon, was working at the Mayo Clinic and had told Don to visit a friend of his who was operating in Borneo.

Don, then in his mid-twenties, says that a man came in with a throat problem. The surgeon didn't quite know how to handle it, but as Don had just finished his ear, nose and throat training he took care of things.

It turned out the man was a tribal chief from up the river and he had a tumour in his vocal cords. Don found some old instruments from the 1920s that missionaries had left behind, and removed the tumour.

Don recalls: "He went from hardly being able to breathe to being able to speak and he was very appreciative of that."

Around that time, after some Australian women had gone up the river and never been seen again, the Borneo government had forbidden anyone making the trip because it was so dangerous.

"So, of course, I wanted to do just that," Don says. "We got an outboard motor, a dugout canoe and a guide, and we took a bunch of medication – I think we were taking malaria pills, or worm pills – to this man's tribe."

The tribe were headhunters and Don saw skulls and shrunken heads in the village long houses.

"I was going up to more and more exotic places and thinking, 'Wow, this is just really amazing'. I came into this one long house and there was a Rolling Stones poster, which puts it into perspective. This was back in the seventies and it really was off the beaten track."

He remembers that, as an honoured guest, he had to put on the chief's headdress which had a lot of feathers – and a lot of lice.

The chief had some shrunken heads in his long house. He was "the real deal", Don says.

Being elected to the Explorers Club was an honour. Astronauts and



The Browns with their cats Captain and Boo Boo, and dogs Bond and Hans at their San Francisco home.

explorers belong. Paddling up the river into an off-limits area qualified him.

He also went exploring in the Golden Triangle, the area between Laos, Thailand and Myanmar, and reckons that adventure would make a whole book in itself. But one story involves hiking through poppy fields. "In retrospect, it was a pretty dumb thing to do. I mean, these are narcotics ..."

At Columbia University he carried out research, writing papers on the development of the ear, and then moved into plastic surgery.

One of the top plastic surgeons in America at the time was the late Professor Tom Rees, "and I was lucky enough to scrub with him and just really enjoyed him. He was a wonderful guy, a great teacher".

One day Professor Rees sat Don down and told him he should go into plastic surgery. Don had been going to specialise in ear surgery, but changed course and says it was the best thing he ever did.

More excitement was to come before Don settled into his own practice in San Francisco.

After his residency at Columbia, he worked as a visiting professor at the University of Monrovia in Liberia, West Africa, and while there found himself in the midst of a coup.

The 1980 coup occurred at the instigation of a politician, Samuel Doe, who violently took control of the country after the then president had decided to increase the price of rice.

Word got out there was to be a protest and all hell broke loose between soldiers and the police. Don's not sure if it was the police or the army, but one group was using dum-dum bullets, which are hollow-tipped and mushroom out when entering the body, so the damage caused is extensive.

Don had been visiting a missionary hospital about 95km out of Monrovia and got a call that many people were being taken to the hospital. He jumped into a car to return, but just outside the

city came to a roadblock manned by drunken soldiers with M16 rifles.

He backed up and "floored it".

A truck with soldiers was sent to pick up him and others and when he got to Monrovia "it was carnage, it was atrocious – 2000 or 3000 people dead. It was just massive carnage".

He did a lot of surgery in Liberia, and a lot of teaching.

"What struck me was you go to these countries and they want to know the latest and greatest plastic surgery procedures but what they really need is basic stuff, hygiene, stuff that's not very glamorous but essential for good public health."

That's what he and wife Leslie were off to help with when sailing around the islands of Vanuatu, distributing boxes of dressings and medical supplies given to them by a New Zealand organisation, Medical Aid Abroad.

After the Liberian coup, Don travelled around Europe, visiting plastic surgery centres and spent

► time at the famous Canniesburn Royal Infirmary, a plastic surgery hospital in Glasgow, Scotland.

Back in San Francisco, he started his own practice, doing all sorts of reconstructive surgery. As the practice matured, he took on more aesthetic surgery, which he enjoyed. The work included trauma and skin cancers – and, yes, boob jobs – but also work with patients who had undergone massive weight loss so had a lot of extra skin.

That work is transformative, he says. "The people who have bypass surgery and lose the weight have a new lease on life and they become almost evangelical."

They have all sorts of problems, from high blood pressure and joint problems to diabetes, and realise they need to change the way they live.

He calls obesity the number one American disease and has been shocked at its prevalence in New Zealand.

While he loved the work in San Francisco, life changed when he was forced to take stock of his life after several close friends had died, people

who he says shouldn't have.

"It made me realise that I'd always wanted to sail through the South Pacific. I'd always wanted to come back to New Zealand and now was the time to do it."

He sold his practice, bought a yacht and he and Leslie spent two years sailing here.

The toughest thing about leaving was not the practice and friends so much as their cats and dogs.

They did look into having dogs on board, and agonised over it, but decided that it wasn't fair on the animals. A cat might end up going over the side which was something they didn't want to have to face.

So, after thinking long and hard, they found homes for their animals.

Hans was an "SPCA special" and labrador Bond was a pedigree guide dog used for breeding.

Both dogs were a handful, Don says, though for very different reasons.

Don was Vice President of the San Francisco SPCA when they got Hans, who was handsome but naughty.

They were ready to adopt and were considering a golden retriever but it was

"a bit soppy". Just as Don was telling Leslie to see if any other dogs caught her eye, in came a striking one.

Leslie said: "Oh, I'd like that dog."

The adoption worker said: "No, you don't want that dog. We're not sure we're even going to adopt him out."

Hans had behavioural issues with men. He'd been abused and his former owner was in jail – "so, of course, that was the dog we adopted".

Don's way of dealing with the behavioural problem was to work with the dog and exercise him to get rid of the excess energy, but in the early days Hans was always trying to run away. He did get out once, but came back.

Another time, when Don went to grab the dog's collar and missed, Hans whipped around and bit him on the hand. Don ended up with an infection of the tendons, which is not good for a surgeon, and had to go to hospital.

He jokes that he went to a SPCA board meeting with his hand in a splint and threatened to sue.

The board had recently been discussing threats of litigation because a dog adopted from the Sacramento SPCA had bitten someone and the



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new owner had sued the SPCA.

That, along with the terrible case of a dog called Fluffy, who had been adopted out only to turn up in a dumpster, ripped to shreds and near death after being used in dog fighting, led San Francisco SPCA to tighten up procedures on who it allowed dogs to go home with.

It's important, Don says, that people adopt with eyes wide open so dogs don't get returned and bounced around.

Of course, Don never intended to sue the San Francisco SPCA and says that, over time, Hans came round "and he was absolutely the best dog".

"I think that once the dog has seen the dark side then he really has an appreciation of where he is.

"That's terribly unscientific and highly personally prejudiced, but he was just the best dog. He died about six months ago and we miss him terribly."

Bond, their other dog, was named by the guide dog breeders, but the name turned out to be spot on because the black lab was a real James Bond.

"He was very good looking and I don't know how he became a breeder

for guide dogs but I think he must have paid someone off because he was – um, let's put it this way, because he was unneutered he had some issues because he thought that every female dog out there had to be mounted."

When female breeding dogs went on heat, Don and Leslie would get a call and as soon as the car exited the freeway, Bond knew where he was headed.

"He would start to drool and get all excited. He was a handful. He was like a teenage kid. But a wonderful dog, a great dog."

They also had two SPCA cats – one called Captain after Captain Cook because he was a great explorer, and the other called Boo Boo for reasons Don won't elaborate on.

When they went sailing into the South Pacific, they left the dogs with Don's stepmother and the cats went to a patient who they knew would give them a good home.

While Don was at the San Francisco SPCA, its president was Rich Avanzino, a pioneer of the No Kill Movement which aimed to find a home for every adoptable animal (Rich was profiled

in the summer 2014-15 issue of *Animals' Voice*).

But, sadly, not all animals can be rehomed, Don says.

"Some are worse than Hans and some have some psychological issues."

Dogs that have been abused as puppies can be ticking timebombs and Don says he has operated on enough dog-bite cases to know that.

"Unfortunately, more than I care to admit. Yeah, I get upset with dog bites."

That's both because he loves dogs and also because he knows how dramatic dog bites are for people.

"I don't like to see anybody bitten by a dog."

Hans didn't get punished when he bit Don, even though the bite caused the surgeon much pain and concern.

"You're not going to correct his behaviour by hitting him more, because that's what started all this – he was abused. I remember just holding him and saying, 'No, that's not good'."

Dogs usually bite when they're scared, Don says. "I love dogs but they can do an enormous amount of damage. Some of the damage to patients I've seen is just awful." ▶



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► You can't blame the dog, though, he says.

"I think it's the dogs' owners. Dogs have to be socialised properly. Knowing how to handle a dog is important. Knowing how to treat a dog, knowing how to set limits for a dog, knowing not to let a child come up on a dog and surprise it.

"That's when a lot of bites happen. A child will jump on a sleeping dog and, well, the dog jumps up and bites them."

The emphasis, he says, should be on educating owners so they know how to manage their dog.

"What we did at the SPCA in San Francisco was when people adopted a dog we gave them dog handling courses. We'd say there's a charge for this, but we'll give it to you free because you're adopting a dog so we think there's a value there.

"We would encourage people to take basic dog handling courses and I think that would stem a lot of the problems."

Don says he initially went on the SPCA board in San Francisco because he loved animals and not because he was a surgeon, but as time went on his knowledge as a doctor was useful to the organisation.

That was when it was developing a new hospital because the one it was using was antiquated.

"We were overcrowded. We were doing the surgery on one floor and the animals had to be carried up another flight of stairs for recovery. It was a very old building. It didn't have good flow, there were a lot of problems and it wasn't earthquake-proof."

That's a real issue in a city such as San Francisco, which has a history of deadly earthquakes.

He says they started with a clean slate and designed the best hospital they could, then went about raising funds for it.

"We ended up with an absolutely amazing facility that is truly state of the art and we were able to incorporate the latest and greatest.

"We organised it so part of the hospital was making money and we could plough that money back in, so it was a way of supporting the SPCA as well."

Don was on the San Francisco SPCA board for 16 years. He says that while he can't say what is required at SPCA Auckland because he is so new to it, he thinks there is need for a new hospital.

Staff do a wonderful job but the

facilities are cramped. SPCA Auckland deserves a state-of-the-art animal hospital because, just like humans, animals get sick, he says.

"I think the hospital would be for any animal that needs treatment. In San Francisco everyone was treated and we put in a sliding scale so if you could afford it you paid for it – but if you're homeless, or you don't make very much money and your animal needs an expensive procedure then the animal should have it and you pay on a sliding scale depending on your income."

Just because an animal had a homeless owner didn't mean it shouldn't get treatment.

Plenty of dogs were adopted by his plastic surgery patients, he says, partly because the animals helped them exercise but also because animals are "wonderful – we know of all sorts of benefits from them".

Much like the Outreach programme in New Zealand, San Franciscans would take their dogs on visits to hospitals.

Don tells of the time when a board member's dog was doing the rounds.

"There was a woman in a coma and someone said, 'Oh, she loved dogs'. They put the dog up on the bed and the dog started to lick the patient and the lady woke up."

Animals have that sort of power.

After Vanuatu back in Auckland, Don hopes to work as a plastic surgeon in private practice. He and Leslie, who is a designer, love being out on the open ocean and while they fish along the way, they are concerned about the low fish densities in the Pacific.

On the voyage here they saw a lot of Chinese, South Korean and Taiwanese fishing fleets off American Samoa, which they say was depressing.

Leslie says it was only when they got to New Zealand that they saw work-ups of huge schools of fish.

They love the dolphins that ride their yacht's bow, and they tell how they swam with whales in Tonga, listening under the water to the sounds of the humpbacks singing, saying you can feel their song in your body.

They're not sure where they'll settle when they get back to New Zealand but Leslie loves to garden and likes the countryside.

Says Don: "We want a garden and we want some animals."

Absolutely, those animals will be rescues, he says, because "they're the best – the SPCA specials". 🐾