Mill Valley Oral History Program
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STEVE POTTS

An Oral History Interview Conducted by
Debra Schwartz and Charlie Vogelheim

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Esteemed mountain biking pioneer Steve Potts was born and raised in Tamalpais Valley. From an early age, Steve learned to live with and off the land, learning to hike, fish, and hunt. These formative experiences led to a lifelong connection with Mt. Tamalpais and the great outdoors. After taking to bicycle riding as a child, Steve developed an interest in motorcycle racing while at Tamalpais High School and became a professional motorcycle racer at the age of 17. Shortly thereafter, Steve turned his sights to mountain biking. In his oral history, Steve shares his passion for mountain biking and explains how he ventured into building and repairing mountain bikes; first as a personal project, and later, as a profession. Steve was a co-founder of Wilderness Trail Bikes, a successful producer of mountain bike parts, and later began selling custom, hand-built bicycles through his own Steve Potts Bicycles brand. Steve shares his insight as a craftsman and builder, emphasizing the important lessons learned from developing a skilled trade. He also discusses the changes he's witnessed in Mill Valley and the importance of family, particularly the influence his parents had on his life and his connection with his two sons.

Oral History of Steve Potts

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December 6, 2014

Debra Schwartz: All right. Okay. So, my name is Debra Schwartz, and I'm here with Charlie Vogelheim, and today is December 6, 2014. We're sitting here with Steve Potts from Mill Valley, California, born and raised, and his beautiful dog, his beagle dog, Cowboy. And so –

Steve Potts: Jack Russell.

Debra Schwartz: Oh, Jack Russell. [laughs] Okay, Steve, hi.

Steve Potts: Hi.

Debra Schwartz: Thank you for taking the time to talk with the Mill Valley Historical Society. And thank you for sharing what you're about to share with us about your experiences and memories growing up in Mill Valley. I'm going to take the first part of the interview and we're going to talk about Mill Valley and your life in Mill Valley. Then as we get into your professional career as a bicyclist and a bike maker, then Charlie's going to take it from there, okay?

Steve Potts: Okay.

Debra Schwartz: Okay, great. All right. So maybe, Steve, you can just start by telling me a little bit about your family; you know, your parents, where they came from, how you ended up in Mill Valley.

Steve Potts: Well, my mom and dad were little kids together in San Francisco.

Debra Schwartz: And their names?

Steve Potts: Yeah, my dad was Frank and my mother's name was Jeanette. And they got married very, very, very, very young, and had a family of five kids, four boys and a girl. And so my dad had the insight as a young man that he wanted to get his kids into the country and out of the city. And my dad loved gardening and plants and grafting plants. I think he always really did want to have a nursery and have something to do with planting, but he never did that. But he expressed his joy for that in our backyard with gardens and fruit trees that he grafted and sorts like that, and the trees were named after all the kids. There's Paul's apple tree and Lloyd's apple tree and Jeanette's cherry tree and the boys' pear tree, and you know. Anyway, he had a real love for that. And he did bonsais. But unfortunately when I was 8 years old, the youngest of the family, my mom passed away when she was 39, so they were very young. My dad was 40. And it was a difficult time of big change in our family. We had a house in Tamalpais Valley way up at the end in the north end, or west end of Tam Valley.

Debra Schwartz: Do you remember the address?

Steve Potts: 550 Marin Avenue. I remember the phone number and everything. That's when they actually used letters instead of numbers for your phone number. And of course, our first phone, we had a party line, you shared a party line. And the phones weighed about 40 pounds, and you were lucky to have a phone if you had one. But we had the phone, and we had a nice big back yard with a creek in the back. My brothers and all of us were into fishing and hunting and all that. We had a big backyard, and when I was little I loved fishing, I still do. And I had my red bicycle that I would take, and fishing rod, and I would ride my bike from Tam Valley all the way up to Mill Valley, Corte Madera Creek. I'd catch a trout, one trout at a time so he would stay healthy, and I'd fill a bucket up with water and I'd rush him all the way back home and I'd plant him in my little trout farm in my backyard.

Debra Schwartz: You'd fill the bucket with water and carry it on your bike home?

Steve Potts: Yes, with the fish in it, one fish at a time. And I thought I would start my little fish farm and my brother and I – my older brother actually made it, but we ran it. He made a fish smoker out of an old 55-gallon drum and we would smoke fish. Because he was a fisherman, he worked for Taylor McGee, which is a big commercial fisherman. He had a big party boat and my brother, you know, got into fishing and we would bring fish home. He'd learn how to smoke it and we'd have smoked fish and – So we all grew up there, and so at that point, I was the youngest in the family.

Debra Schwartz: What year is this, approximately?

Steve Potts: My mom passed away in 1962, and shortly after she died, our family – my oldest brother was a pilot in the Navy, and my other brother was in the Marines, and my sister, my only sister, was going to Tam High School. She was in a bad car accident where she had crushed her heel cartilage and couldn't walk. She had a cast on for like a year and a half, two years. It was a horrible accident. But she moved away from home very young so she could be tutored at Tam High School because she was a bright gal, and she got scholarships to college and graduated from Berkeley and she's worked really hard. So my brother and I who were 11 months apart, we grew up kind of –

Debra Schwartz: Which brother?

Steve Potts: Ron, Ronny. My brother Ron, and I grew up together as young kids and he was 11 months older than me. And Ron passed away in 1990. He was a commercial fisherman and he'd spent a lot of time in the sun and he had malignant melanoma. But he was struggling with a lot of that, a lot of issues around that, and he took his own life. So growing up was kind of tough. My dad struggled with the loss of his wife, and he never really ever recovered from that. But he was a great man. He was very compassionate, he was not a drinker or anything. He was a straight-up guy. But he was devastated losing my mom, so his – he loved us but he wasn't paying attention a lot in our growing-up years

just because he was distracted with trying to pull things together. But a great guy. I really miss him.

Debra Schwartz: We digress just for a moment here to learn a little bit more about his parents and your mother's parents. I mean they were in San Francisco, a little ancestry background?

Steve Potts: My dad was brought up by his mom, Nita Mitchell, who was a pretty well-known songwriter and singer. But he was sort of an orphan. He kind of grew up on his own. And my mother was brought up by her grandmother because she was basically abandoned as a child. So they were both, you know, had a tough upbringing. And they worked really hard to keep our family together and raise a family. They did a pretty good job for the tools that they had. So my mom was a very hard worker. She was a totally straight-up woman. She made everybody's clothes, she made her own clothes. She made stuff happen. And my dad was more of a dreamer, but he was a very passionate craftsman. He made telescopes, and everything he made was world class. Everything. He helped build a flying wing sail plane in the old heliport down in Tam Valley, the Commodore Heliport, and he went to France or somewhere in Europe and won some championships, and he made a violin that was played in the San Francisco Philharmonic. I mean he hand-carved it when he was a very young man, when my mom was pregnant with one of the boys, the older boys, and he had his – he did that. He made wooden cuckoo clocks, he was a watchmaker, he made my mom's wedding ring, he made everything. He made airplanes and gliders with us and made telescopes. He made the focal testers to grind the mirrors to measure the mirror parabola curves. So he made all the machinery and made the mirrors and hand ground them, and was just a brilliant guy, self-taught. Everything he did, he made bows and arrows that – he even made the glue. He went to the old rendering factory and bought the sinew and we'd spend weeks in the backyard boiling sinew and tannins and he would make the glue. He made everything.

Debra Schwartz: So your backyard was his workshop?

Steve Potts: Well the backyard was big, you know, where we had a garden and trees and all that, but he also had a garage workshop where he'd, you know, make stuff. But he was just a real talented guy. You know, the thing about my dad which I really remember was that he never had much. Like he got an old funky hand saw, like a skill saw but an old-fashioned one. And he made a picnic bench, but he needed a table saw, so he made the picnic bench with the old $2 saw he got at the salvage store and made the table saw out of the picnic table! But my dad could make anything with the very least, and it would turn out beautiful. It was accurate and pretty and aesthetic. So when I grew up, I thought, I loved making things, so I thought, I'm going to try to always buy the best tools because I saw how my dad just struggled. Like he would spend a whole day just making the tool to make what he wanted to make.

And I remember when I was a sheet metal worker, I started when I was about 12 years old, I got this new battery drill. It was brand new technology. And I made the excuse that I had to get another one just so I could give my dad that one. What it was is, he had never had a nice drill. It was always broken cord and frayed and you were lucky if

you didn't get electrocuted, literally. I'm not kidding. And so he just was very thrifty and made that happen. So I told him, I said, "Dad, I need a new drill for work, and I want you to have my old one." And the key word was "the old one," so he took it. He wouldn't have allowed me to buy it for him.

Anyway, we were kind of that way. We grew up kind of, we didn't have much. And I remember as a kid wearing my shoes out and there would be holes in the bottom. And so we'd cut cardboard and slide it in, you know. And I wouldn't dare tell my dad I needed shoes because I knew he couldn't afford it. He just went month to month trying to keep it together. And losing our mom was just devastating. It took me forever to grasp the idea. I kept saying, "Well when is she coming home?" I was only eight years old, and I couldn't quite grasp the concept of death.

Debra Schwartz: Well it was, as I recall, it was surgery went bad.

Steve Potts: Yeah, surgery went bad. And it was unexpected and it was devastating. So I saw how my dad struggled, so I didn't want to add any more to it. We didn't complain, we didn't ask for things, we didn't lie, and it was like you just made do with what you had.

Debra Schwartz: What primary school did you go to?

Steve Potts: I went to Tam Valley Elementary, right down in the very end of Tam Valley, by Tennessee Valley. And then I went to Edna Maguire. And my second oldest brother, Lloyd, went to Edna Maguire when it opened up, brand new school. And then he became a teacher and he taught there the year that it closed. He was a teacher there for 30 – you know he went over to the new school, but he was a teacher, seventh- and eighth-grade teacher, for 30-something years at Mill Valley Middle School.

Debra Schwartz: Edna Maguire at that time –

Steve Potts: Edna Maguire.

Debra Schwartz: Over by Strawberry, was it?

Steve Potts: No, it was in Alto, at the end of Lomita.

Debra Schwartz: Okay, fine.

Steve Potts: Yeah, it's way over there in Scott Valley, it's still there, yeah.

Debra Schwartz: Yeah, that one.

Steve Potts: Yeah. So it was our seventh and eighth junior high at that time, and then the junior high moved over to where it is over on Camino Alto, yeah. Camino Alto. So he taught there until he retired, and he's a rancher. He's always been a cowboy and a rancher, so he's still ranching up in northern California.

Debra Schwartz: And then you went on to Tam High?

Steve Potts: Then I went to Tam High. And I got a couple of little scholarships from Tam High and I went to College of Marin, but I kind of knew what I wanted to do. I was a doer and I didn't want to hang out in college. So I went there for two years and I got a degree in automotive technology of all things, but I was also a sheet metal worker and I was fabricating and doing layout work, which is fairly complicated geometry-wise, so I just had a natural liking to it. I was good at geometry and so I could make these really complex, you know, compound curve hoods and fittings and restaurant hoods and copper hoods for custom homes, and I got really good at that.

Debra Schwartz: And in high school?

Steve Potts: Well, not in high school. I started at 12 years old sweeping the floor at O'Connor Sheet Metal while doing paper routes, folding papers, and working at Shoreline Market. And then additionally cleaning the parking lot at 3:00 in the morning every Sunday morning before my paper routes. And I couldn't work enough. I was –

Debra Schwartz: Where did you clean the parking lot?

Steve Potts: At Shoreline Market.

Debra Schwartz: At Shoreline Market?

Steve Potts: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They had me going on everything.

Debra Schwartz: And the Mountain Home Inn, right?

Steve Potts: Well, we delivered groceries to Mountain Home Inn from Shoreline Market. Yeah, and then so I would deliver groceries to the Vincents up on Mount Tam, and then, so yeah, I worked a lot. I kind of got it hammered into me right away, early as a kid, that I had to work to make it happen. I almost got kicked out of high school for working. I used to play hooky every Wednesday and do a 15-hour shift at the *Herald Tribune* picking up papers at the printer. Of course, I wasn't old enough to drive, but I went with the other guys, and then we would fold and address them and stack them and load them back in the truck. But it was a 15-hour shift. And I played hooky and made excuses for probably four or five months until the principal finally caught on. The teacher finally said, hey, he's gone every Wednesday. And I was doing sign painting and everything I touched I ended up almost having a career in. Like I started painting stuff and then I'm painting commercial signs in San Rafael at 15 years old. And finally the principal had to call my dad in and they said, "Hey, your boy either needs to go to work or quit high school. He's got to do one or the other." And so they made me make a decision right there. So I gave up all my sign painting jobs, I quit the *Herald Tribune*, and I finished out my high school, which was a smart thing to do. And then I went to College of Marin for a couple years while working and racing motorcycles and wind surfing and fishing and bike riding.

Debra Schwartz: Sounds like you had a lot of energy.

Steve Potts: Oh, my gosh. And a really good thing about all of this was, is, that I played music. I played drums as a kid. I was very into music, and so every minute was taken up, and I mean passionately. And then the kind of cool thing was, is here I am growing up and growing up in this era of a changing world, and music and everything changed. It was just a big time of change. I was actually probably the only, one of the very few kids that wasn't drinking and smoking pot. So I actually remembered everything. You know what they say, if you remember the '60s, you weren't there. But I actually do remember it. And I couldn't understand why people were doing all that, because life was so full. I was absolutely so high on life, you know, I was running trails as a kid and riding bikes and racing motorcycles and wind surfing. I'm like, "God, how could you – ?" I mean, there's so much to do.

Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

Steve Potts: And there was so much to do. And I was playing music and I was getting to meet all these people that I had only read about. Things just fell into my lap. It was amazing.

Debra Schwartz: So let's go back a little if you can and just describe what Mill Valley was for you as a young child, let's say 15 and under. Just the general ambiance of the city.

Steve Potts: Okay, well the city. Okay, so I was involved in the scouts. I was an Explorer Scout and in the Explorer Scouts in those days we had a lot of responsibilities, community responsibilities. We helped with different things. We helped with events in the city, whether it was a dog show or a barbecue; we're putting out flowers, the big square flower pots for the city of Mill Valley at Easter, or some Christmas activity. So we would all pitch in. There were maybe 15 or 20 of us, and they were all really great guys. So I remember getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning to walk from Tam Valley because I didn't have a car. I didn't even drive yet. And I'd meet some of the older guys, and we'd get in their trucks and we would end up at somewhere at 4 or 5 in the morning and we'd be loading up flower pots of beautiful flowers to put out in front of the businesses.

So we would do the whole downtown area and what I remember about Mill Valley was – of course, now I look back and I'm aghast, it's like Peet's Coffee used to be Mosher Shoes where we bought our shoes, and the bank was Pat and Joe's Restaurant, and the hardware store was, is now whatever it is, Banana Republic or Wilkes Bashford or something. And the fancy restaurants is, where the Mayer's boy store – where we bought our first gym clothes. Anyway, it's all different. And I remember though, it was a quiet town. People were going about doing business, and there were painters and carpenter. But in the evenings, the sidewalks rolled up. It was quiet. And then Sundays were absolutely – everything was shut and quiet and it was closed. And I remember when they closed Mayer's store or Mosher's. Well, first of all, where are we going to buy shoes?, number one, and number two, is like, how are these guys going to make a living selling just coffee? Okay, well of course, they make 40 or 50 or 60 grand a week in

coffee. People are, you know, buying their $4 and $5 and $6 lattes by the lineful. So I really didn't see it coming.

But how it was for me, you knew everybody. There was Molly the meter maid and there was the police officer, the grumpy police officer. I think it was Joe Canet was probably retired by then, but he was one of the police chiefs, and then there was Turzig. I mean there were all these old names I can't remember. But there were the old guys, and there was Vic Paulson who ran the Parks and Rec Department, and they had their little white pickup truck. I just remember everybody. It was more personable. And the guy that owned Bennett's Variety wore a suit every day and he welcomed us in the store, it was Bennett's Variety 5 & 10. And then there was the movie theater where the little kiosk was outside and the movie cost 10 cents. And I remember the day that I went from 10 to 11 years old, and she asked me how old I was and I slipped and I said 11. She goes, "It's 25 cents now. But we'll let you get in today." And I was like, "25 cents! I'll never be able to see another movie in my life!" But there was that and then there was Cy Weil's. Do you remember Cy Weil? Cy Weil was the old liquor store guy and he'd stand out in front, and there was Jimmy Quinn's and the Mill Valley Market, and there was Esposti's. It was maybe 12 feet wide, but it was real long, deep. It was a fountain, and you could buy a nice lunch, a hamburger and a milk shake. They had the best milk shakes.

Debra Schwartz: Where was that located?

Steve Potts: Okay, you know where the coffee – you know where the Bank of America is?

Debra Schwartz: Mm-hm.

Steve Potts: Or Wells Fargo now?

Debra Schwartz: Mm-hm.

Steve Potts: Wells Fargo, not Bank of America. Wells Fargo was like one or two buildings to the right, and it was a real skinny little shop. And it's gone. And of course, there was this – was it Esposti's or, what is it, La Ginestra's?

Charlie Vogelheim: La Ginestra's around the –

Steve Potts: Yeah, and they were, yeah, and they've been there a long time. And then there was the Rexall. Oh, and then there was the 5 &10 shop, where the little health food store went in.

Debra Schwartz: Natural Foods?

Steve Potts: The Natural Foods store. That used to be a variety store, and then there was the livery stable, then there was the – what was the hamburger place, the Palette? They made hamburgers like this [gesturing to show hamburger size]. If you could eat four in an hour, you could have them for free, but nobody dared try it because you'd die.

Debra Schwartz: And you said it was – for those that can't see you, you're holding [indicates large circle].

Steve Potts: Oh, they made the biggest hamburger in town. It was incredible.

Debra Schwartz: Like a diameter of about 7 inches.

Steve Potts: Yeah, it was huge. And then of course, across the way was the Old Mill Bar, get your fill at the Old Mill. Anyway, and I have some stories about that, too, down the road. But then there was a dry cleaner, and there was a florist shop, Mr. Black in the florist shop. It was pretty. There was an old Montgomery Ward's catalog store in town, and then I remember when Baskin Robbins opened up, and there was a – okay, when I was about 14 years old, Varney's store had an old Quonset hut in the back, which is now fancy shops. But that was the back of town. It was on the other side of the creek, right downtown Mill Valley.

Debra Schwartz: Over by the Sonapa Farms?

Steve Potts: Behind Sonapa Farms, yes. And now they're fancy shops and it's all developed. But there was an old shop there. It used to be a plumbing shop or something, and it was just filled with boxes of stuff, and Sam Snyder, I knew Sam because I went to school with his daughter, he owned Varney's Hardware. And he had an old sheet metal brake in the back. And I said, "Sam, you got a sheet metal brake, do you want to sell it?" I was like 14 years old. And he goes, "Sure, make me a good offer." So I really did my research and I made him an honest, fair offer, and he took it. And I got some other tools with it, but I paid $1,200 and I was 14 years old. I didn't have the money, but I walked over to Bank of America and I went in with a friend's parent who knew me, and they vouched for me, and they gave me a loan for $1,200. And I was a kid. And I think they might have co-signed for me or something, but I paid it off in one year, and I had my own little sheet metal business at 14 years old. And I remember I took – or maybe I was 15, I don't know. I was pretty young. And I had a friend take it, and we hauled it off and I cleaned it up, and all that stuff. But I had my own little sheet metal tools as a little kid because I worked for O'Connor Sheet Metal, and I loved making things. And you know, I was always kind of an entrepreneur. "I'll make it myself," you know.

Anyway, I don't remember how old I was; my memory's kind of – all I remember is I was young and I had to borrow friends' trucks to do all this stuff, and I didn't have a car or anything yet, so I was probably under driving age. And then of course I started making stuff, and everybody in town had me making tool boxes and everything.

I remember Pete Brindley was – no, no, it was Craig Counselman. He was a police officer and when I did have a truck, I had an old '56 Chevy truck that I got for $207, and it as my first vehicle, and he – a police pulled me over, you know with the lights and sirens, he pulled me over, and it's Craig and I go, "Oh, hi, Craig, what did I do?" He goes, "Oh, nothing, nothing at all." He says, "I was just stopping you to see if you'd make me a tool box." I go, "Oh, my God!" This is, you know, pre-telephone, cell phone and all that stuff. It's just, hey, there he is, I'll just pull him over and ask him, you

know. Anyway, it was kind of fun. There was a lot more personal rapport. People were more connected in so many ways, you know. Even our little town sheriff –

[Pause in the recording.]

Debra Schwartz: There we go, we're back on.

Steve Potts: So anyway, even when we were kids we had a sheriff in Tam Valley, and his name was Boyd Burnham. And he looked just like Andy Griffith. And he actually was more Andy Griffith than Andy Griffith. He was truly a wonderful sheriff, and people respected him. And as kids, we never wanted to disappoint him, but he would see us, you know, walking out in Tennessee Valley with our .22 rifles, and Boyd would drive on by and he'd slow down and he goes, "Boys, what are you doing?" "We're going hunting." And he said, "Well, just be careful." I mean, and we knew we had to be careful. We knew that we didn't want to wind up – but then he would swing into our driveway sometimes on the way home. He lived up at the end of the horseshoe – we called it the horseshoe – and he looked up at –

Debra Schwartz: Where was that?

Steve Potts: Tam Valley. Tamalpais Valley, up in the northern end of Tam Valley. Boyd lived at the end, and he'd go home in the sheriff car, and one day he pulled in in our driveway. He stopped, he goes, "Hey, boys, it's almost Fourth of July, you got any fireworks?" And of course we did, and we go, "Yeah, we got a few," which probably wasn't really okay. And he goes, "Well why don't you bring them on up to my house on Fourth of July and we'll set them off safely?" Which you couldn't do now. It would be just a huge liability for a sheriff, but everybody loved and respected him, and it's actually what made our community work so well. And the thing was, we went up to Boyd's for Fourth of July and he had more fireworks and made it more fun. I remember it was the first time I ever saw a Roman candle. "Wow, Boyd's got Roman candles!"

It was all probably illegal at the time, but it was just, it was more real. It wasn't all this, you know, legalistic, you know, liability blah blah. It was actually our community at work. And it was actually functioning in a really healthy way. Because as kids, no matter if you were getting in trouble or not, you did not want to disappoint and let Boyd down. You didn't want to go through the embarrassment of getting caught doing something stupid or just doing the wrong thing. And so, Boyd Burnham really had our hearts. And we respected him.

And so there was a lot of things went pretty smoothly as I remember as a kid. He'd see me on my mini-bike or go-cart doing a paper route at 5 o'clock in the morning. And nowadays you'd just get confiscated and thrown in jail, and the parents would be called. Boyd would just wave at me and tell me to be careful. He knew the scene. He knew we were from a home that struggled, and the kids are out doing a paper route and working hard, and my older brothers were always working, and you know it wasn't like it was bad stuff. Illegally speaking, yes. No, I did not have a driver's license, and I was underage and blah blah blah. But we were trying to make ends meet, you know? So either it was a lot slacker in those days, or he just wanted to help things go smooth, that's all.

Debra Schwartz: So, now we're going to go a little along here time wise into your teens, and now we're into the '60s and there's a lot going on in San Francisco in the late '60s.

Steve Potts: Yeah.

Debra Schwartz: Did that impact your life here in Mill Valley?

Steve Potts: Well absolutely it did, because I played drums as a kid, and I grew up with some very talented musicians, of which a lot are professional today.

Debra Schwartz: Names?

Steve Potts: I grew up with all the guys that –

Debra Schwartz: Were they local musicians?

Steve Potts: Local, famous rock and roll.

Debra Schwartz: Just a couple. Because people that won't know those names –

Steve Potts: Well, Mario Cipollina, Sean Hopper, Huey Lewis, Huey Craig, Bill Gibson, all those guys we played music with. I played with Bill in the drum corps at Tam High and Sean and I grew up together and Mario's mom was the first person to ever pay me for playing music. She paid Bill Gibson and I two bucks to play drums in the Mill Valley parade when we were kids. But you know, a lot of things were going on, but I was really fortunate to have been around real creative people, and in an environment where all that was fostered to the point where really great things happened. I ended up being a racquetball partner with Billy Cobham, and I didn't even know who he was.

Debra Schwartz: Who is he?

Steve Potts: He's one of the greatest drummers to ever live. Really, he's very talented. And he's older than me, and he's a big, black handsome man, and he was a phenomenon. He's a great friend of mine, I've known him for 35, 40 years. And we were playing racquetball together and it ended up that he mentored me playing drums. So you couldn't dream of being mentored by a more capable, wonderful person in your life. And he was playing with Count Basie when he was 14 years old. I mean he's played with every – he's on hundreds if not thousands of albums. I mean, he's just a phenomenal person. And so we became friends, and are still friends, and he's living in Europe right now, but all these things just sort of happened to me growing up.

You know, I just fell into people who were talented and sincere and I was able to grow through those relationships. And many more than that, just in my racing career I ended up growing up with guys that were just some of the best in the world. And those things elevated you. My dad taught me as a young kid, he said, "The most important thing is who you pick as friends. You want to be around people who are going to help

you grow and elevate and learn new things, and not people who are going to drag you down."

And so I was very fortunate that I got involved in things early. I got involved in wind surfing when it just started, and it was this complex, new thing that people couldn't figure out, and I just got into it, and next thing you know, I'm windsurfing with some of the best guys in the world, and learning from them. And it was just an incredible – I can't imagine this. I was a kid, and getting on a windsurfer and learning how to really learn it. I couldn't imagine anything better than this connection with nature and life and the wind and the water. And that's one of the reasons I couldn't understand why people did drugs; because life in itself was so absolutely amazing.

And I also learned from losing my mom that life was a very delicate balance. It was like, I always visioned that I was walking on a razor blade and you could fall off in either direction. And so I knew that at a young age, my appendix burst and I almost died and blah blah blah. And I had my last rites read to me a couple times through that episode, and almost died, and I realized, wow, this body I've got and this mind I have is so delicate. And I learned early on that life was just so magnificent in its simplest form that I didn't want to do anything to muddy it up. I was watching friends drop off the map right and left from doing drugs and I watched their personalities change. I watched them go from capable people to incapable people, and I watched them, some of them die. I just went, "Boy, all that was happening when I was growing up. And I was definitely a goody-goody, but I had real reason to be that way. It was survival.

Debra Schwartz: You talk about your relationship with the water and nature. How about Mount Tamalpais?

Steve Potts: Well Mount Tam was actually the thing that I think was one of the connections that saved my life, after my mom died. It was a place I went to and I literally – I had this old paperboy bike that was probably my brother's, and it was huge. It was heavy, it was too big for me. But I remember venturing away from home on the bike, and I was pretty little. And I'd go as far as I physically could. But I remember the day that, you know it took me probably a year and a half, two years, to get enough strength to get up to Bolinas Ridge. So I got up to Rock Springs and went out on Bolinas Ridge and I couldn't wait to turn around and tell my dad that I discovered the wild west, really. And going up Mount Tam and listening to stories of the train and the whole thing. When I got on those fire roads and those trails, it just took me to a place that was so peaceful and unbelievable, that it was like a peaceful retreat. And so that really, Mount Tam became a place of just rejuvenation and it was incredible. Just really incredible. And it really was part of what helped me grow. It helped me sort of get my feet underneath, and keep my feet underneath. So it was really a grounding force, Mount Tam. And of course, one of my favorite books, and I found it when I was in my move, was the Mount Tam railroad book. And I paged through it, and I found two or three pencil drawings that I'd made for my dad. They were birthday cards, you know, and it was the old Inn at Muir Woods or the old West Point Inn. Or the one at the very top, the big inn that burned down twice.

Debra Schwartz: The Tavern.

Steve Potts: The Tavern. And so yeah, Mount Tam was great. One of the funny stories I always tell was that when I was 11 – see, when I was a little kid, my dad would take us up to Mount Tam. We'd camp out and my dad called them star parties. And we'd take the telescope up on Mount Tam. We'd camp wherever we could, Rock Springs, or you know, it could be anywhere on the mountain. And there would be some celestial happening where Jupiter was going to be closer and everyone wanted to see it through the telescope and blah blah blah. So my dad would take us up there. So he helped introduce us to Mount Tam. But one of my funnier things was, of course I was a latchkey kid after my mom died, and my dad was just out trying to make a living and keep things together, and didn't always come home, and sometimes ended up sleeping in his car. He was kind of falling apart. And so there was nobody at home to watch us. Was anybody home or is anybody following the rules? Is everybody in bed by 8 o'clock and did you brush your teeth? That just didn't happen in our house. So I went up camping on Mount Tam but I ended up getting lost for three days. And so I was lost for three days but nobody noticed. And I was really lost. I was up between Rifle Camp and Laurel Dell and I kept making a loop around and I couldn't find the main road to get home.

Debra Schwartz: How old were you?

Steve Potts: I was 11. And so I was following my intuition to keep making the same mistake for two days in a row. And finally on the third day, I went, I'm going to do everything opposite of what I think. And I literally found the road in 15 minutes. That's how turned around I was. And I remember running down Mount Tam and getting to Mountain Home and then sliding down Edgewood and ending up – I don't remember where I ended up. I ended up in Judd Penman's grandmother's house. I thought Judd, my friend Judd I grew up with, would be there, but I knew where his grandma lived, and he lived with his grandma. And I told her I'd been gone for three days and I was really hungry. And she fed me.

Debra Schwartz: Had you eaten anything in three days?

Steve Potts: Oh no, I was so hungry. And she was so funny, she gave me cereal and it obviously wasn't enough and I remember taking a big thing of peanut butter and putting this scoop – so I had cereal and peanut butter, just she scooped it right into the bowl. I was just eating like a ravenous little hog.

Debra Schwartz: You must have looked a fright.

Steve Potts: Yeah, by then I was so happy that I knew where I was, that nothing else mattered. I was already over it. I wasn't traumatized that much. But yeah, Mount Tam was my – and of course I explored Mount Tam.

I started racing motorcycles when I was 14. It's called AMA Sportsman Racing. And to turn pro you had to be at least 17 and you had to turn expert. So basically on my 17th birthday I turned pro, and I was racing with guys I had only read about, and you know all over the United States. I was racing with the best in the world.

I bought my first home, when I was 23, on Mount Tam. And it was up on Ridge

Lane, and of course we would wait till the stormiest of days to go out on these little tiny motorcycles, those little Honda 70s, they were tiny. And we would just explore. And in those days I don't believe any of that stuff was illegal, but nobody did it. But I couldn't wait, because I didn't want to go out there and intrude on anybody's hike or anything, so I'd wait till there was like a lightning and thunderstorm. It couldn't be any worse, where gale winds and hurricane winds, and Fenn and I would go on my little Honda 70 and I'd explore every trail. It was like an adventure.

And of course, the thing I have to say about all of this is that these were healthy things. This is what young boys want to do. And what it did is it helped form me into a man. All that runaway energy was put in a really good, constructive area. Kids need to go climb trees, they need to be exhausted, they need to go fall out of – they need to fall down, they need to get up, they need to do things that are a little bit edgy because they're men. They need to find out what their limit is and they need to explore and they need to do all those things that come sort of primally, naturally, that kids don't do any more. They're all in front of a computer, and they're all on Facebook, and the high schools no longer have wood shops, machine shops, pottery shops. They're all computer science and it's like, the tactile and physical things are missing. Not just men's life, but women's lives, from everybody's life. From that connection of food, a connection of gardening, and a connection of where everything comes from, and a disconnect from building things or what it takes to build a home or nail a piece of lumber, which I do all of that, you know. I know lumber, I build things, there's nothing that I don't want to tackle, because it actually connects you and makes you responsible for those things. It's like, you know, so those things, you know, nowadays of course, you'd get arrested and thrown in jail if you were caught with a little motorcycle somewhere on Mount Tam. And I understand why. It's more people, it's crowded. It's not totally cohesive with entire use of the community. But in the old days I was very fortunate to be able to do that, because it forged me into a young man. I mean, I used to hunt in those areas. I used to collect food because we needed to, you know? It was like, you know, when kids were throwing food on Halloween, I was hiding my paperboy sacks, I was asking them for eggs so I could take them home and have breakfast the next day. I couldn't stand the thought of throwing food. First of all it was just, I was just like, "Really?" First of all, it's mean-spirited; and number two, you're wasting food. So I would come home with, you know, as much edible food when I went on my paper routes. I was picking apples and peaches and apricots, and it was like, or I was fishing. I know I sound like I'm the Dean of Doom, we were living off the land, but we were, sometimes. You know, we'd go fishing. It was a real treat to have salmon to eat when there wasn't a lot of stuff going on otherwise. And my dad would even say when he would finally come home and make something to eat for us, he'd make a Mount Tam Rocky Mountain stew. It was like he'd make the biggest pot of stew he could because he wanted to try to have as much food there for us as he could. Anyway, so that was his name, the Mount Tam Rocky Mountain stew.

Debra Schwartz: I might have to steal that.

Steve Potts: So, and the interesting thing, just through osmosis, my boys, both my boys, very respectful. They hunt, they fish, they dive.

Debra Schwartz: What are the names of your sons?

Steve Potts: My youngest son is Brennan, he's 19, and my oldest son is Daniel, he's 23, he's the engineering student. And they're both very capable. They take care of things from start to finish. I mean they'll shoot an animal and clean it and prepare it, and do everything properly so it could be eaten, or they help feed families. It was amazing, and why I like this is because they know where food comes from, they're respectful. And they love animals, they love the environment, they love all those things. But they also, I think, live in balance with it.

One of the days, it was probably many, many years ago, we were hunting with some friends and the boys, and somebody asked me at the market, it was ironically at the meat counter, they said, "Hey, did you guys get any pigs?" And I said, "Yeah, the guys got one pig." And there was a very attractive, very nice lady standing at the meat counter holding a big roast in her hand, in a perfectly packaged, you know, sterilized package. A big red chuck roast. And she says, "You kill animals?" And I said, "Well we go hunting for food." She said, "That's so cruel!" And I was really patient with her, I said, "But ma'am," I go, "you know, you're actually hunting too, you have a roast in your hand." She goes, "Well that's different." And I said, "Well, I don't know if you've been to a slaughterhouse or where animals are processed, but I'm actually taking responsibility, and getting an animal in its natural environment might be a more humane, natural thing than that." But I said, "But everybody does it differently," and I said, "We've just chosen to take responsibility for gathering our food, and everybody's a little different." And I didn't have a beef with her or anything, but what I noticed clearly was her complete disconnect, that the fact that she went to somewhere where it was handled in an "institutional professional way" made it different than us going hunting in the environment. And I'd much rather know exactly from start to finish, and I told her, I said, "Ma'am, you know, shooting an animal and cleaning a warm-blooded animal is not the most pleasant thing to do, but it is taking responsibility for the food that you eat. And there's a lot of work involved in that. And it's just the way we chose to do it." And so everybody's got a different take on life and a different take on all of that, but I feel very fortunate that we've done these things and are more intimately involved with the process of doing it.

Debra Schwartz: Okay, so now I think I want to come back to when Charlie's done talking with you, but you are an infamous man in the bicycle world, and you've had an amazing career, both as a rider and a professional bike maker. So this is where I'm going to step down and Charlie's going to move in and we're going to explore this part of your life.

Steve Potts: Okay, thanks.

Charlie Vogelheim: Hey, Steve. So, I'm excited to talk to you about this. Let's just go right from the beginning of the bike. And you've already mentioned a couple things, so your first bike that you remember?

Steve Potts: Okay. My very, very, very, very, very, very first bike was a little red bike, and I was probably 4 years old, and my brother was 5. Or maybe I was 5 and he was 6. And it was a little tiny red bike with tiny little wheels on it, maybe 12-inch wheels. And it had no coaster on it, it was just, you pedal and it goes and everything keeps going. And we had that bike. It was a Christmas present for my brother and I, and we didn't have much money so my brother and I got to share this little red bicycle. And it literally lasted for five minutes. My brother drove it down the driveway, he got to ride it first. And he drove it off the stairs into the backyard, and the front fork broke immediately from the stair. And fortunately my brother wasn't hurt, but the red bike was broken, and I was in a puddle of tears because I hadn't even gotten to ride it yet. The red bike. Man, I was so –

Charlie Vogelheim: You're still talking about it. [laughter]

Steve Potts: You have no idea.

Charlie Vogelheim: I think I do.

Steve Potts: What that means to a little boy. And so what happened is my dad said, without hesitation he said, "Don't worry about it. My friend Bill Breeze can weld that up and we'll fix it right away."

Charlie Vogelheim: A familiar name.

Steve Potts: Bill Breeze is Joe Breeze's father. And Bill Breeze and my father made telescopes together. And Bill Breeze had a beautiful machine shop that Joe inherited along with his bike building skills, and that was Joe's father who got Joe into bicycles. So there was my earliest connection with the Joe Breeze family at age 4 or 5 years old, was through my dad.

Charlie Vogelheim: And the red bike was repaired?

Steve Potts: The red bike was repaired and we rode that thing until the wheels fell off.

Charlie Vogelheim: You're the youngest of five, so others in the family had bikes? Were they handed down? Trikes or things like that?

Steve Potts: No, at that time, my oldest brother is 14 years older than me, and he was already, you know, they were grown. And my other brother was 10 years older than me. My sister is 4 years and my other brother was 11 months. So my oldest brother did have a paperboy bike that he used for his paper route, and he used to give me a ride on the handlebars, like he would get off from Taylor McGee, it was a quarter mile up the road. Taylor McGee was a seaman and my brother was a deckhand. And when we knew Lloyd was getting off work, they'd go by and they'd honk the horn. We would run up the road, my brother and I would take turns, so we could ride on the handlebars on the way home. Lloyd would put us on the handlebars and we would sit on the handlebars and hold on and he'd go, "Okay, we'll –." They had little knobby tires on it, had a little tread on them,

and when the tread would start humming, he'd say we were breaking the sound barrier. He says, "Okay, be quiet, we're going to be breaking the sound barrier." So he'd pedal the bike and the tires would go *whrrrrr whrrrr whrrrr whrrrr*, and he goes, "Are we breaking it yet? Are we breaking it yet?" "Yeah, we're breaking the sound barrier now." So anyway, we would fight to do that on the way home, so that was another bicycle experience.

Charlie Vogelheim: When you say a paperboy bike, too, because you know –

Steve Potts: Schwinn, or Elgin.

Charlie Vogelheim: Well there was a Schwinn, the Stingray became the paperboy bike because –

Steve Potts: That was way before Schwinn, Stingrays.

Charlie Vogelheim: Right. But before that, it was just the regular Schwinn standard design frame, right?

Steve Potts: Standard, yeah, and it had fatter tires on it, and it had steel rims, and it was big, heavy, and you know, had usually an inch pinch chain and one speed, and there was nothing –

Charlie Vogelheim: And this was the kind of bike that later began referred to as a clunker bike, to a certain extent.

Steve Potts: Yeah, a clunker bike, yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: Right.

Steve Potts: So anyway, I went from the little red bike to riding on my brother's handlebars to then when I was – it was before my mom passed away, so I must have been either 6 or 7 or we were 7 and 8, my brother and I. We wanted bicycles so bad, and I bet it took my dad and mom a year to save for this, literally. And we had one Christmas, we had a Christmas, and it was a nice Christmas. I remember I got a thing of Play Doh, it was the heaviest package, so I thought, oh, this is heavy. So we had the Play Doh, and I got Play Doh and a baseball or something. And we didn't have much. It was really, it was tight. And we were trying very hard, we were very gracious for it, but I remember in my heart, it was like, "No, we didn't get a bicycle." You know, there was a dream to get a bicycle for Christmas. And the bike didn't come. So we thought Christmas was all over, and you know, my parents had coffee out, and there was Christmas cookies and stuff, and somewhere when we weren't paying attention, my older brothers wheeled in two brand new, red Hawthorne Hercules bikes, one for me and one for my brother. And that was – the entire planet stopped. It was unbelievable. And I remember, we didn't have helmets or anything, they didn't even have helmets then, and we were like – my brother and I were – our mouths were like open. We were in such shock. It was like winning a $2

million lottery. It was not expected. We knew our parents didn't have the money, and it would have been a miracle if it ever happened, and they made it happen. We got these bikes, and I'll never forget it. My brother and I got on the bike, and my mom and dad said, "Have a good time, why don't you ride them around the horseshoe?" It was a whole mile around, that was a long way for a little kid of 7 years old, or 7 or 8 years old. So we rode around the horseshoe. I'll never forget it, and we rode back and it was like I was in heaven, and that was the bike –

Charlie Vogelheim: This red bike lasted longer than the first one?

Steve Potts: It did. And the thing was, that red Hawthorne was the one that I used to get the fish in Mill Valley Creek. Then I was mobile. And I'd ride that bike to go fishing, and I remember one time it was really funny. One morning I would go fishing with my buddies Peter Hina and Bill Harrington. And one morning we were hiking to go fishing, and left Tam Valley. We spent the night at Bill's house in Tam Valley, we called it Birdland, it was the tract houses. We were walking over by Tam Junction and it was still dark out and Peter was a real jokester, he goes, "Hey, a skunk!" And we went, "Yeah, right, Peter." Well we got sprayed by a skunk. Okay, I'll never forget this day because we wanted to fish so bad, and this skunk creamed us, full on creamed us. We went running back and woke up Bill's mom, and she was in tears because we smelled so bad. We were plastered with this goopy stuff, and she made us get undressed. She was in tears it was so bad. I mean she was literally in tears. She didn't know what to do, because we undressed and we were down to our little underwear, and she took the garden hose – this is like still on darkened Sunday morning – sprayed us with the thing trying to get this off and made us soap up, and nothing could get the smell away. We ended up having to bury our clothes. But we stood there while she went and bought – she went and got in her Volkswagen and bought tomato juice, which didn't work at all. Bill and I and Peter were the scourge of school for two weeks we smelled so bad. But the reason I'm telling you this is because we still went fishing. Okay, so what happened was –

Charlie Vogelheim: Wait a second. I mean, you can't remember this goopy – was this like a 25-foot tall skunk?

Steve Potts: No, but you have to know something. Skunks spray a lot, and the smaller the skunk, the more powerful the spray is. But it's hideous. And we were sprayed from between, the closest from me to Debra, like 5 feet. We were covered in this – it was – you can't get rid of it. Have you ever been sprayed by a skunk?

Charlie Vogelheim: No.

Steve Potts: Okay, well then you don't know what I'm talking about.

Debra Schwartz: It actually fills all the air. It makes the air moist all around you.

Steve Potts: You suffocate. Actually you suffocate, your eyes are watering, your mouth. It's horrible. So anyway, I remember what we did is, since there was three of us,

we decided to walk, because I only had my bike down there. So Peter ended up going home, and I think Bill and I still wanted to go fishing, so we got some clothes somewhere, I don't know where, but I ended up – Bill riding across the bar on my bike, so we had two fishing rods, a red bucket, and we were going to still go fishing. So we went fishing, and I'll never forget it. We were up by Park Hole, and we were laughing so hard that I couldn't steer the bike, and I – you know how telephone poles have a wire?

Charlie Vogelheim: Oh, yeah.

Steve Potts: I couldn't see the wire, and we hit the wire and we crashed so bad. And we weren't like impaired, but we really got hurt. But it was like, it still wasn't going to stop us from going fishing. So I'll never forget the day. It was like we still brought fish home, and put them in the creek and we smelled horrible and the next two weeks at school was like, you know, being a leper. It was horrible. It was just awful.

Charlie Vogelheim: And where is Park Hole?

Steve Potts: Park Hole is off Miller Avenue. Park Street, Park Avenue, and we called it Park Hole. That was sort of the beginning of the good fishing. Park Hole had a nice deep hole there and there was some good fish in it. And then Bill and I fished a lot together, but we kind of had it dialed like, every Saturday morning, we would go fishing and the neighbors – we would go right through their back yards, which you probably couldn't do now – but people knew we were going to be fishing every weekend and there was people that actually made us lunch. There's this one place, you go past Mill Valley Market, was another good hole, and then we'd keep going on up, and we got up into the canyon there. I remember there was one old home, a big old home – and the creek kind of went around a bend –

Charlie Vogelheim: I'm going to just interrupt, for the locals, to say you're going up Corte Madera Creek, so at this point, you've gone past Vogue Cleaners and –

Steve Potts: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: You've split where Old Mill and Corte Madera –

Steve Potts: Yes, yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: And you're continuing up Corte Madera Avenue through Miller Grove now, and then beyond.

Steve Potts: Yeah, yeah.

Debra Schwartz: By Dell Canyon.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah.

Steve Potts: Yeah, by Dell Canyon. Well we'd go past Old Mill Park and blah blah blah. So we'd go up there and we'd be –

Charlie Vogelheim: That's Cascade Canyon.

Steve Potts: I'm sorry, Cascade Canyon, yes.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah.

Steve Potts: Because the other one is on the other side, and but we would go up where the lumber mill was, where the Old Mill Park is. That's still Corte Madera Creek, I believe.

Charlie Vogelheim: So that's right where they come together, at the Lumber Yard.

Steve Potts: At the Lumber Yard, yes.

Charlie Vogelheim: Right.

Steve Potts: So, and that creek used to be on the other side of town, by the way. And then they filled it in and they'd call it Goheen Gulch and all that, it was called Goheen Gulch. Anyway, so we would go up the creek, but when we would go up, we would be going through people's backyards, and I'll never forget this lady, an old lady, very sweet, and she goes, "How you doing fishing, boys?" And after a while we had it timed just perfect. She'd say, "Are you hungry for lunch?" And we'd go, "Yeah!" So she'd make us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Oreo cookies. It was like, oh my God, the Oreo cookies! You have to remember my house was bare. There was nothing. It was like, peanut butter? Awesome. Milk? Real milk, not powdered milk? And Oreo cookies? It was like, wow! So we would do that, and these people were just gracious to us. And they're, "There's the boys." We'd just hike through the yard and we'd fish and we'd be laughing and caught a good one, and blah blah blah. And anyway, so we would do that, or I did that forever as a kid.

Charlie Vogelheim: And just to finish off on the fishing, you would catch the fish up in the creek, and you're well into Mill Valley, miles from Tam Valley.

Steve Potts: Yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: And put it in a bucket.

Steve Potts: No, but I would do two things. Sometimes we'd fish for the fish farm, and sometimes we'd fish for food. So we would have our little bag, we'd put our fish in and we would go home and cook our fish. And that was one reason I got in trouble. I went to Mount Carmel as a kid, to catechism. And I went to catechism at 9:00 every Saturday morning. I would go there. I would get up early, I'd go fishing, and I always got carried away fishing. And then I would run up to the Lady Baltimore Bakery because Lil Kroner

worked there. We used to call her "Squirrely Head." And Lil Kroner knew we were poor, and Lil Kroner would do two things, which you couldn't do now. She'd say, "Do you want to cut some bread with the bread machine today?" And I said, "Yeah." She says, "You gotta wash your hands." So she'd make me wash my hands, and then she let me put bread in the bread machine and slice it. And so she'd let me do that, just because she knew I loved to do stuff like that, and I loved machinery and cool things. And then she would give me – or she probably pay for it herself – she'd give me a 10-cent brownie, in a Lady Baltimore bag, and then make sure I'd send me off to catechism. But I'd always be late. So I'd have my fishing rod, I smelled like fish, I either had fish in my pocket or in the Lady Baltimore bag with my brownie, and I would show up to catechism late. I got in trouble every Saturday morning. I'd spend with my hands in the corner being punished from 9:30 to 11 every Saturday morning because I was late and I smelled like fish.

Charlie Vogelheim: Mrs. Morgan doing that?

Steve Potts: Oh, and Reverend Mother and Sister Mary Anna, and oh. Sister Mary Anna was very sweet to me, but Reverend Mother was ruthless. I thought I was going to die. I thought, okay, I've got – but I couldn't skip it, because then you for sure were going to die. Anyway, so I did that.

Charlie Vogelheim: Why do you think there were, I mean there were fish there, I know they stocked it sometimes, they would dam up the creek every now and then, and put fish in.

Steve Potts: They would, yeah, yeah. Well all of those creeks were very good short – they're called short run coastal California streams. They all had steelhead in them, and all had trout in them, and still do. Matter of fact, there would be a – at the lumber company when we were kids, there was one we always named him Larry or Larry the Lunker, whatever. But we would never fish the hole below the lumber company right where they have a little hole in the office floor because there would be a resident steelhead come every year, and we wouldn't touch them. We just would relish them as beauty. It was like, when we were kids, we'd hike from Tam Valley over through Green Gulch, all the way to Muir Beach, and we'd catch fish that were the size of our legs. And we'd carry them home in a gunny sack and feed the family. You know it was like –

Charlie Vogelheim: Those were the salmon coming up, the Coho.

Steve Potts: The silver salmon and the, yeah. And there was steelheads, silver salmon, and I believe even some kings or Coho. I don't know what they were then, but it was amazing. Absolutely amazing. Oh, my gosh. But we would catch a fish, and I remember as a little kid, they'd be so big I'd have to bear hug them on the way home. If I caught a fish and I could feed my family. I felt like I was the man of the house. It was amazing.

Charlie Vogelheim: I mean you said you were going out hunting. What were you hunting for?

Steve Potts: In the old days, well we thought we were deer hunting, but we would rabbit hunt and stuff like that. We would clean them up and eat them. My dad told us if you shot something, you had to eat it. So we were good about doing that. We would go pigeon hunting, we would go quail hunting. Of course, I'll probably be thrown in jail for all this, but we were, you know this was 50 years ago, or more than that. But that's what we did. And yeah, we just made it happen.

Charlie Vogelheim: We've gotten away from the bikes a little bit.

Steve Potts: Oh, sorry.

Charlie Vogelheim: No, this is fantastic. So back to bikes. So you got your red bike.

Steve Potts: Okay, so I got the red bike. I'll fast forward.

Charlie Vogelheim: No fast here.

Steve Potts: So the bike thing. Okay, so remember the bike thing for me was just a new –

Charlie Vogelheim: Just transportation.

Steve Potts: Well it was wonderful. I loved it. And it was freedom. It was independence. It was a way to get further out in the woods and all that. But then what happened is I went to Tam High School. At the same time I was still doing bicycles I was interested in motorcycles, so I remember being 14 years old, that's the youngest you can possibly race, and I can't believe I talked my dad into signing to let me race. We didn't have health insurance, we didn't have any of that stuff. And you know what he told me, he said, I'll never forget it. He said, he goes, "Steve, I have never had to worry about you doing the wrong thing. I never had to worry about you doing drugs or doing bad things. But I'm worried about you now." He says, "But I know you love this, and I know you want to do it, and you need to know if you get hurt, we're going to be in a lot of trouble, because we can't afford that." He says, "But I'd rather you do something you really love and stay out of trouble." I mean he had a really good insight. I was a risk. But okay, so you got a 14-year-old kid who says, "No you can't do this and you can't do that," so you sit around idly going, "What can I do?" And my dad knew I was really passionate about it.

Just a really quick story to tell you how driven I was. When I was 9 years old, I wanted to take drum lessons from Todd Fleming at Tam Valley School. But you could only take drum lessons if you could afford piano lessons. You could not take drums unless you took piano lessons. We didn't have the money to take piano. They didn't teach you piano at the school; you had to take private piano lessons. My dad, "Sorry we can't afford it, we don't have the money." And the school said, "Sorry, we can't do it because you can't take piano lessons." I said, "I'm going to take drums whether you like it or not." And so I went home, and I watched my dad make telescopes and wooden things and model airplanes, and I had my dad kind of lay out some wood for me, and I wanted to

make a drum and drumsticks. So this is how naïve I was. I took some veneer and I glued it, and I made my own drum and I glued it around the banister. And the drum was completely done. All I could see was making that drum. But then I thought, how am I going to get it off the banister? The drum was made, the hoop was made, it was all screwed together and glued together, all laminated at 9 years old. And I went, well I've got a problem. I either have to dismantle the banister, or take the drum apart and do it another way. That's how myopic my thinking was. It was like, I have a goal, I'm making a drum, I'm going to make my own drumsticks. I carved two drumsticks with a knife and made this drum. And then the funny thing was the drum was like around the banister, it wasn't good to anybody around the banister. You know I'd measured things to make sure the skin would fit on it, and I could – so anyway, I undid the whole thing and I figured out another way to put it together. And I brought this drum and these drumsticks to school, and I said I really want to take drums. And Todd Fleming looked at me, he says, "You really do, don't you?" I said, "I really do." So at 9 years old, he let me in the drum program with no piano lessons. And then when I was in the fifth grade or sixth grade, they were busing me and some of the other kids to the honor orchestra day at Maguire [Edna Maguire School], because we were just really into it. So that's how motivated I was.

So fast forward, I started racing when I was 14. I remember I bought my first motorcycle from paper route money, and it was a piece of junk, and I didn't know I was going to race. I bought that when I was like 12 or 13, and what happened is I was racing this little tiny '90 Hodaka down at the salt flats under Richardson Bridge, and I was really good on it, because I rode it all the time. I was smoking guys on much bigger motorcycles. And somebody says, "Steve, you should be racing, you know." I said, "Yeah, I want to race." So when I was 14, I talked my dad into letting me do it, and he let me do it. And there I was throwing my motorcycle in the truck of other kids that were racing. They were older than me, and that took off, and I started racing and I was really serious about it. I started running, which was on Mount Tam because I wanted to be physically fit, and I still rode my bicycle because it helped me with my riding skills. I rode my motorcycle and I raced, and then when I turned 17, I was a junior in high school and I got my physical and turned pro, and next thing you know, I'm racing all around the country with some of the best guys in the world.

Charlie Vogelheim: And you're succeeding?

Steve Potts: Well, I would say what I would do, yeah, I was succeeding in a lot of levels. I was very good, but succeeding as a pro racer is like, in all honesty, there's let's say there's 300 great racers out there. There's only a handful that are really making a good living at it, and all the other guys are the guys that make their life hard racing. And I would say I was one of the guys that made the real good guys – I made them work really hard to make a good living. I mean I was really good, but they were exceptionally gifted. And the other thing is their lives were very myopic. That's all they did, and here I was windsurfing and diving and going hunting and riding my bicycle and playing music. So I had to make a decision after racing pro for four or five years that it was this real serious enough thing that you need to give it your all or naught. Because it's a matter of life and death at that point. You don't just go out there for fun like a Sunday warrior. You're

dedicated because you will get hurt. It's a deadly game. I was very dedicated when I raced, and I was very good and I, of course, there was guys that were way better than me I mean, but I was racing with those guys.

Charlie Vogelheim: I'm trying to remember a time frame when the movie *On Any Sunday* came out.

Steve Potts: That was my first year as a novice, and I was at a lot of those places where that was being filmed, so I ended up racing with most all those guys, at one time or another. So the thing is, is that I realized early on that I needed to make a decision. So you know, I remember my last race, I actually won, and I remember selling one of my race bikes that night. I sold all my other stuff and I stopped, because I knew it was something I couldn't just dabble in, and not get hurt. And I did get hurt, and I did have my big crashes and everybody does. You never get through that stuff without, you know, you just get through it. So the long and short of it is while doing that I was in machine shop at Tam High, and I was going to the dumps with my buddies finding old junky bikes at San Quentin dumps for 25 cents. I was welding them up and trying to make them better, and that was my sort of – the motorcycles end, the bicycles were sort of my connection. And actually after I quit racing motorcycles, I got more and more involved in the bicycles.

Charlie Vogelheim: Going back just a little bit, because you made mention of running on Mount Tam, did you ever have a bike up there? Were you ever doing any of the old railroad races, chase them down?

Steve Potts: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. It was part of my trying to stay fit stuff and so, but bicycles were always a part of my life. But there was a time that I didn't ride them as much because I was just too busy doing other things. I was working, trying to support my racing habit, and everything kind of melts into everything else, but so I went from making these junkyard bikes, you know, that I thought were pretty cool, and believe it or not, I did not know Joe Breeze that well. My father and his father knew each other well, but it wasn't until later in life that I became really good friends with Joe, and also Charlie Cunningham. Charlie and I actually went to Tam together, but we didn't hang out. None of us really hung out. We were all doing our own thing, but it was later in life that we came together and Joe and I started doing things together, and then I started helping Joe in his shop. Then Joe and I decided to do a trip to New Zealand on these bikes that we made.

Debra Schwartz: That's when you went to New Zealand?

Steve Potts: Yeah, Joe and I went to New Zealand together, and it was absolutely one of the best trips I've ever in my life, ever took. Joe and I just had a great time. It was such an adventure. And Joe is a great person to go with, because he's the organizer, and he's got the map out, and how many miles we're going to ride this day, and where we're going to end up, and what we're going to eat for dinner, and Joe was just a crackup. I remember Joe and I were running low on food and we missed the ferry. The ferry went

on strike and it was going to cut 85 miles off of this southern – we bushwhacked through the Southern Alps from Queensland or Queenstown, New Zealand to Milford Sound. So we basically ate up all our food doing, going around the lake to get to our starting point, which we were going to do on a ferry boat; because going through the Alps was our challenge. So by the time we got to the starting point, we were already out of food. And I remember on the way over there, Joe and I stopped, I had a problem with my bike and he said, "Well you work on your bike, and I'll go in and see what they have to eat." So Joe comes out of this little funky inn with two meat pies, and I thought it was out of the goodness of his heart, he was, "Here, I got you some meat pies." And I inhaled them, you know, and I said, "What about you?" He goes, "I just wanted to see how your bike's going." He said, "I'll go in and get mine in a minute." I don't remember the exact words, but then he says to me, he says, "Which one did you like better?" I said, "Well, what were they?" He goes, "Well the first one was a ferret pie, and the second one was possum pie. But which one did you like better?" I go, "Oh, okay, so you had me eat ferret pie and possum pie to see which one you should eat?" And so I kind of got what it was. He was going to see if I was going to drop over dead eating the meat pies. I said, "Well the possum pie was better, Joe," so Joe finally, he was kind of sheepish, he goes, "Okay, I'll get the possum pie." But it was funny that I was his guinea pig. I thought he was being really polite.

Charlie Vogelheim: That's the other pie. It was a choice by the way, the guinea pig pie.

Steve Potts: The guinea pig pie, yeah. But it was ferret pie and possum, but the possum was definitely better. Both creepy animals to be eating, but when you're hungry it doesn't matter.

Charlie Vogelheim: And just to go back with Joe, you mentioned that his dad had a machine shop.

Steve Potts: Yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: And that was in Sausalito area?

Steve Potts: No, no, no. It was at his home up in Mill Valley.

Charlie Vogelheim: Oh, it was at his home in Mill Valley?

Steve Potts: Yeah, on Country Club Drive.

Charlie Vogelheim: And he was, oh, that's right, by the golf course there.

Steve Potts: Yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: And then he was doing some automotive stuff with racing and things like that?

Steve Potts: Yes, he was. And that was a big part of his life. But Joe's father also was a cyclist, and he was one of the early guys that would actually like ride his bike to work. Bill Breeze was an amazing guy. And I'll never forget when I painted bikes for Joe. I was a good painter, and I remember Joe's father telling me that, and he'd seen a lot of really famous, really good painters. I'll never forget when we brought painted bikes over that Joe built that I painted, and Joe hung them up in the furnace room so they'd cure. And Bill Breeze looked at me and he says, "Those are the finest painted bikes I've ever seen." And to me it was like, I can't believe that I got that compliment from Joe's dad, because I really respected him.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah, so let's go on with the bikes here, so we've gotten out of motorcycle racing, you're getting into bicycling, you're developing your friendship with Joe Breeze, he's a couple of years younger than you?

Steve Potts: Yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: And now cycling is taking off in a whole new direction in and around Marin, in the form of mountain biking.

Steve Potts: Yeah, so what happened is, Joe made the first ten bikes. At that same time or before, I was doing my junkyard bikes. You know, I was welding up broken seat tubes. Usually the seat tube pulled out of the bottom racket, and then they also broke by the drop out. So I was fixing and welding those in my little shop on Montford Avenue, 105 Montford Avenue where I had a little garage. So Joe was building bikes that were really cool. And then Joe decided to build another group of bikes. After we kind of became friends, he built 25 bikes and I helped him build some of those like, you know, I did the cleanup work and some of the painting stuff, and we just – we worked together and it was a lot of fun. And then Joe and I, out of that batch of 25, he built a new bike for himself, and he built one for me that I helped with, just helping Joe. And we decided to go to New Zealand on those bikes.

At the very same time, this kind of all happened at once, so when anybody says, "Oh, I invented the mountain bike and –" no one really did. What happened, it was an energy of people that had this interest in taking bikes that of course already existed, and making them fit our needs, which was – there was already the paperboy bike, the Twin Excelsior and that's what Joe modeled his original geometry off of. Tom Ritchy was building road bikes, and he was an up-and-coming builder and very hard worker. Joe helped design bikes so he could make bikes for Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelley, which, Gary Fisher asked me to make bikes for him before I was actually building bikes. And so all this stuff sort of all happened at once. And of course, in Colorado there was young kids out there riding from Crested Butte to Aspen on funky old paperboy bikes. So it was basically something that was bound to happen in this time in history.

But what happened in Marin County was special. It was Mount Tam, the inspiration of mountain biking because of its beauty and, you know, just beautiful riding challenges, and then there was the technology, and I'll just put it out there, Joe Breeze's father's machine shop, and the Tam High machine shop that helped train kids. You see, those are the things that are missing in high schools now, is they actually had a place

where – Tam High was actually one of the best vocational schools, because then people needed to make things and be welders and be woodworkers and people actually made things when we were growing up. It wasn't all made in China, where it is made now. And so what was happening in Marin County that was magical was, you had people like Joe Breeze and my father who actually made things in their funky little shops. Joe Breeze's father's shop was not funky, it was a really beautiful shop. And then you had young kids like me and Joe who went through a good high school that had some training skills, hands-on, where you got to make things and cut things and work a lathe and a mill and grab a welding torch, and just do things. And so it was the magic of the combination of all those things, and the mountain and our interest in cycling that led to the development of the modern mountain bike.

Then so where my thing took off from there was when Joe and I went to New Zealand. That was the catalyst for me in 1979 or 1980 to finally say, "I love this so much I'm selling everything I own," which I did. I quit my job. I was a journeyman sheet metal worker for McPhail's, the biggest sheet metal shop in the county, and they kept giving me raises trying to keep me there because I was a good worker. I sold my home on Mount Tam, I sold my truck, I sold everything I could, and I bought a lathe and a mill, and I got this little shop. I paid $35, this garage, $35 a month for rent, and I could hardly afford that rent after I got it. Matter of fact, I paid my rent by making the owner a bicycle for a period of time. I thought I was so broke I made him a bike, because I put everything into this. So anyway, my thing came out is, I started building bikes in my little garage on Montford Avenue as a profession. That's when my sort of career started in 1980, when I actually took raw tubing and I machined it and welded it myself from scratch, and did it. And when somebody bought a bike, I was absolutely amazed. I was like, "Wow, they bought a bike, I can't believe it!"

Charlie Vogelheim: And there's so much more than just buying tubes and putting them in the shape of, I mean, there's infinitesimal angles.

Steve Potts: Oh yeah, it was a struggle.

Charlie Vogelheim: There's everything you can do, and then even the material strength and the weld points and everything.

Steve Potts: Everything was a learning experience.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah.

Steve Potts: But you know, in a lot of ways, I was trained very well, to look at things in a good way, and to understand certain things. But I really wanted to learn. And so I focused all my energy into learning everything I could, whether it was welding, machining, seat of the pants engineering, how to test things, what made things work, how strong brass was versus this kind of welding, and silver, and the fits and the gaps and everything. Just, where something's going to break, and learning how to break things to find out where it's going to break, and it was like a college education from the ground up. And I was really serious about it. I mean, I used to work around the clock building bikes.

Charlie Vogelheim: And did you start off building a certain kind of bike?

Steve Potts: Just a mountain bike.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah.

Steve Potts: Fat tires.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah.

Steve Potts: Fit those fat tires in there and get up on the mountain. And then I started painting bikes, and then I started painting thousands of bikes, literally, for other builders, as time went on. But then what happened is my relationship with Charlie Cunningham and Mark Slate grew, and Mark came in and helped me build bikes. He would assemble all the bikes and he built great wheels, and he's just this real smart guy. And then Charlie and I and Mark decided to make parts together to help the economy of scale, so we said, "Okay, we're going to make, you know, five sets of hubs, and Steve will machine the outer part and Charlie measure the inside and Mark will put them together."

So then all of a sudden, other little builders started coming along like Scott Nichol of Ibus or Joe Breeze, or whatever, and they start saying, "Hey, can you make a couple extra for me?" Then one day Sun Tour showed up in my shop in a black rental car with all their engineers, and next thing you know, Mark and Charlie and I are designing parts for them and licensing them. We got some patents and this and that, and then the roller cam brake with Charlie and then the grease guard system, and then next thing you know, we're designing tires for Specialized, and we're designing bikes for Trek Bicycles and we're licensing our intellectual property. We became, at one time, the largest licenser of intellectual property in the bike industry. And so through that licensing is how we grew our business, and we started making components and then I was the always "Made in America" guy. I'm going to weld every single bike and make every hub and of course the business grew way bigger than that.

Charlie Vogelheim: Is this Wilderness Trails?

Steve Potts: Wilderness Trail Bikes, yeah. And then in a lot of ways, Charlie and I grew out of that, because it was, you know, it grew to a big world-wide business, and just to keep it in simple terms, I was still the guy that wanted to make stuff here in America, and wanted to be responsible, and I've always been a passionate guy about making stuff and being a craftsman. So I'm sort of – what is it? "I was raised a tightwad and nobody's going to cheat me out of it." And so what I'm saying is that your roots have a lot to do with how you – I mean my dad made everything that he needed. My mother made all our clothes. It's like, I've never really wanted to live beyond my means. You get to this thing where you're flying around the world and you're not making bikes any more, you're going to trade shows and talking to engineers and doing business overseas and dealing with this and that, and you're like, "Oh, wait, what happened to my passion? What happened to actually making and designing and innovating things?" Well, you just got sucked down this black tube of business. Which is not bad, and really smart guys go with

the flow and they make a ton of money and then they do other things in their lives. And I've always just been more of a passionate guy, which I'm glad, because I'm passing that on to my boys. Both my boys are very talented, and I'm just hoping that they'll be a lot smarter than me. One's getting an engineering degree, and he's already much better at business than I am. But he's also very passionate about understanding and testing and making things and innovating. So hopefully, you know, they'll learn some things that will pass on.

Charlie Vogelheim: So, I'm meeting someone, and I say, "Oh, I've just had this great conversation with Steve Potts," and they go, "Who's Steve Potts? What does he do?"

Steve Potts: Well, what do I do? I make really nice functional stuff. I do other things than the bikes.

Charlie Vogelheim: But how do you like to be known? If I say, "Steve Potts, oh, he's _ "

Steve Potts: Well, first and foremost, I would like to be known as a good father, a responsible, good father that made that my priority, my number one job. And then I was a craftsman. Number two would be a craftsman, with integrity, that likes to make and invent things that are helpful to people. And so that's kind of it, really. The most important thing you leave behind is what you leave people, and it's not the physical, tangible things, it's the memories that you taught them. And I've always enjoyed teaching people whatever I know. Probably on my website, more builders go to my website because I'm open about how I made something or I figure something out. And you're just sharing knowledge to help somebody else. You know, here's what I see it as. Like I gave these big seminars on welding titanium. Well most people were shocked that I would do that, because you're giving away all your secrets. But the reality is, if you're going to play the piano, you still have to sit down at the piano eight hours a day or 10 hours a day and play the piano. Just because you talked to some great piano player doesn't mean that you all of a sudden are going to be a great piano player. So for me, I'm very willing to share information with young builders who want to learn something and do something really positive with their life. But they still have to do the work. So I'm just helping them along. I still have builders that are really successful in the industry now say, "Steve Potts was the guy that helped me learn how to weld. He helped me get it. He was the one that actually spent the time and looked over my shoulder and I'm really grateful for that." It's like, that's a great gift to give somebody.

Charlie Vogelheim: Quick aside. Have you seen any of the virtual welding programs where you can almost, you're practicing welding, but almost in a 3D virtual world as opposed to actually heat and –

Steve Potts: No, and it's probably very good, and I don't want to pooh pooh that, but in reality, just like playing music, you have 12 things going on in your brain at once. Just like welding. It's not just a simple like, you press the pedal down and there's literally at least a dozen elements that have to end up at the same millisecond. And, you have to be

able to articulate what it is that's happening. So you know, guys will sit down, they go, "Oh, I just can't do this." And I go, "Well do you know what's actually happening? And why did you move along with your weld when that other thing hadn't happened yet?" And so for me, you know, the virtual world is like, a lot of kids can't walk up to a manual machine and run the machine correctly because you know, they're all CNC trained. They do it on a computer, the computer figures out all the feeds and the speeds and blah blah blah. Okay, when you're a kid, you actually have hands-on tactile experience, and you know what it feels like when the feed is wrong, or the speed is wrong or the surface feed are wrong. Or you know that when the weld is too hot, too cold, or you've moved too fast, not enough filler rod, etc.

Actually what it really takes is dedication to sitting down and doing that, every day of your life. And so people say, "Aren't you tired of building bikes? Haven't you mastered it?" It's like the day I think I've mastered is the day I'm going to be dead. Because the day you think you've mastered something, you're in serious trouble. Because you do not ever stop learning. And to learn, you have to actually do it. You know, a lot of guys are like, "Yeah, I built my business, I built a few hundred bikes, now everything's made in China. And I make lots of money." That's all great, but that's what you are, you're a businessman. You've made a good business, and some people build better businesses, and some people build better bikes. And it's not that the better business doesn't offer a good bike, it's just the whole different animal. And so it's just not a world that I want to be connected to, because it's disconnected. It's connected in the world of business. Somebody's put all those pieces together, and there's a real beauty in that. I'm not demeaning that at all. There's the beauty of getting your engineers together and doing the testing and getting the right vendors into the right shipping company and the right trading company. But what happens is as a person, you become really good at that, which makes lots of money, or you can get really good at the actual intimate process of life. Like I built my home. I did have help on it, but I milled the lumber, I carried all the lumber. I'm intimately involved and connected to what it takes to build a home and the resources that it uses, and the energy. And just like building a bike, I'm completely connected to the process of building a bike. So I'm just saying my specialty is different. My specialty is more of an intimate connection. I'm connected with my customers and what they want; I'm connected with the building process. I'm not really a great businessman. I understand business.

Charlie Vogelheim: I don't think you need to make any apologies. You're just saying your process is more important than the business.

Steve Potts: Yeah.

Charlie Vogelheim: There's always business that comes along, but you're more focused on the other side on the product.

Steve Potts: Yeah. I'd rather have a conversation with a person than meeting them on Facebook. Because it's more connected. I'd rather go hunting and catch a fish and clean the fish and prepare it for dinner, than go to the market. I'd rather build my own bike. I'd rather build my own home. I'd rather raise my own kids. All those things are more of an

intimate connection. And so, in a way, it's a blessing and a curse. Because next thing you know, you find yourself having to make everything. I had to paint every bike. I had to become the best painter in the world. I had to cast every head plate and use my scrap brass for the – I had to make the tooling to do that, and I did it with a really good friend who helped with all that. But what happens is it's a plus and a minus, like everything. The pluses and minuses of being a great businessman is that you make really great money and it affords you other things. But you're less connected, and your time, you know, usually is more obligated to more larger pieces of the business, which, whether it's your trading company or your shipping company or your vendor relationships. So what it does is it takes away from your family. For me, I made a decision to even have my machine shop at the home so I could be more intimately involved with raising my kids and teaching them things and doing their school projects in the shop. And here's one thing I learned –

Charlie Vogelheim: Wow. I bring in something made out of pipe cleaners and your kids are bringing titanium.

Steve Potts: Well no, but I realized something early on. I didn't have the guidance because my poor dad was heartbroken – my mom had passed and my dad tried everything he could. But my connection to my dad was sitting on a little bucket, watching him make a telescope. So I absorb things through osmosis. My time was spent with my dad, and it wasn't like, you know it was a wonderful time. But, when your kids come home from school and they're excited about something and they say, and you're tired from your day's long work, and they say, "Dad, after dinner, can we go up and make a wooden rifle?" And you're thinking, "Ah, I'm really tired, can we do it tomorrow?" You don't ever do that. When they want to make something, they have the focus to do it now and they're excited about it. And no matter how tired you are, I've learned that you've got to jump on it right then, because the next day will never happen. Because they've already forgotten about it. They're like, "No, Dad, I've got soccer practice today," and next thing you know, the opportunity is gone. The opportunity of being with your kid and teaching him something, and connecting with them as the father and him as your son, or daughter, whatever you have, is you made that connection. What happens then is they see you go over to the thing and they watch you work the mill, and you teach them how to do it, and what you've done is you've just equipped your son or daughter to learn something on their own. And everything I see my kids do, I go, "I didn't teach them that." And then I think, "Wait a minute, I did. They were watching me. They didn't miss a thing." And what it is, is I see them doing the same stuff because of the time I spent with them, not because I was a great teacher, but because I spent time with them. And so, it was really fun. It was like, so when your kid asks you to do something that has to do with learning or being connected, you got to jump on it. You don't get the second chance on that one.

Charlie Vogelheim: Let me close out the bike discussion and then turn it back over to you, Debra. Where you are now, right now, you've got more people wanting bikes than hours in the day, so you're just –

Steve Potts: Yeah, I'm slammed.

Charlie Vogelheim: Are you?

Steve Potts: Yeah. And one of my –

Charlie Vogelheim: That's a good thing.

Steve Potts: It's a really good thing, and one of my challenges is to learn how to be more organized and work smarter. For instance, like this is an example. I had my little school marm desk that I've had for 40 years, and it's about this big. It's the one that's in the shipping department now. And it had my doors and I was confined and I had my computer there and I had about a square foot to work in, and Daniel goes, "Dad, you can't work like this anymore." He says, "We need to take that desk out of here, and put a long bench in here so you can spread out, put the computer underneath." And he literally made that. He made that bench out of $30 of material, and he did it in one day. The next morning he had the computer hooked up, and everything running. And now I can, we've got three people working up there on computers, and I can lay my bills out and do my bills, or I can lay my drawings out and have four or five drawings out without being crowded. I'm trying to organize now because one of the things that weighs on me is trying to meet my deadlines of, or my estimates of, you know, bike builds and all that. And I want to get it so I can turn bikes around much quicker and have a shorter lead time. And part of that is, there's a comfort to having all this work lined up, but I really got to get the lead times way – I mean some builders are out there years.

Charlie Vogelheim: If right now I come up to you and say, "Boy, I'd like a new bike."

Steve Potts: Well I'm shooting for you know, ideally I'd like to have it under three months, but I'm telling people six months, and in reality, it runs over because it's so much labor. It's just time consuming. And the thing is, if I didn't have to order material, do my sales tax reports, keep track of my billing and my bills, I would get them done in those times. But the business is so much more than just hands-on building. If I were to get eight hours in the shop, I've got to work here twelve hours.

Charlie Vogelheim: And I understand backlog and things like that, but how much time are you spending actually building that bike that I just ordered from you?

Steve Potts: Oh, you mean the hours put in?

Charlie Vogelheim: You've got the materials, you've got everything here, but then you've got to, you know, cut and bend and weld and put it in paint.

Steve Potts: Yeah. Well always that's a big question. People say, "How many hours does it take to build a bike?" Well, I try to physically work, that means physically in the shop, eight hours a day. That doesn't include the two or three or four hours in the office. So that's a big question, because every bike's a custom bike build, and some people order just a frame. Some people order a frame, fork, stem, and handlebars. Some people have rack mounts, fender mounts, S and S couplers, special this, special that, electronic shifter.

So it can be anywhere from 20 hours to 80 hours for a bike, you know? So, and then there's sometimes thousands of dollars in materials, literally.

Charlie Vogelheim: And obviously we're talking about titanium. We're talking about welding. Have you experimented with any of the new materials, like carbon fiber or even some of the things coming out of 3D printing?

Steve Potts: Well I know quite a bit about that, and I have a lot to say about it. Actually one of the best engineered materials in the world is steel. It's got more engineering time and it's a phenomenal material. The reason that I like titanium is it's another extremely phenomenal mechanical property material. But it's got some real special things that I like about it. Setting that aside, the world of carbon fiber – and I'll just explain this in mechanical terms – carbon fiber is the ultimate marketing and big company material. Number one, it's extremely light. But its properties are not properly suited. Carbon fiber's main attribute is strength in tension. There's three kinds of failures: tension, compression, and shear. Tension you kind of pull apart, shear you're trying to break it, and compression is pushing things together. So its ultimate attribute is in tension. Well the bike is very rarely in tension anywhere. Number two, it's very light, and it's very strong. But number two, it doesn't have a yield point. It's an ultimate failure. Most materials, you know, whether it be aluminum, titanium, or steel, they have a yield point. That means where they permanently deform, and they don't return to their original shape, and they do two things: they either crack, wrinkle, work harden or they show some form of failure before the ultimate failure, which is a little bit higher on up. Carbon fiber has a very high ultimate strength, but it has no yield point. There's no warning between those things. And it's also UV sensitive. It's sensitive to bonding with other materials because of the different electronic makeup of each material, whether it's carbon fiber and aluminum.

So there has to be a barrier to keep those parts turning into a battery. It's very notch sensitive so it's sensitive to people's throwing it around or scratching it or kicking it, and it has no yield, so it's an ultimate failure type of thing. The wonderful things about it is that you can build these beautiful carbon molds, have low skilled labor, put together very straight, beautiful bikes, inexpensively on a mass scale. But it's not a lifetime bike. It's a very light bike that has some very temperamental failure modes, and it's susceptible to aging. Where titanium is kind of a lifetime bike. Throw it in the ocean, it's not going to corrode. All the parts will be gone before the bike frame is, and it's got a really good strength to weight ratio. It's got a good modulus of elasticity, it's got a great failure rate, it's got good ultimate strength, it's got all the things that you like about to make it a safe, reliable bike. So I understand those other materials, but they're not my favorite to work on because they don't fit the old tried-and-true-Steve Potts-I'm-just-a-reliable-old-work-horse type of deal.

Charlie Vogelheim: Okay, I'm going to add that to your description, just a reliable worker.

Steve Potts: Yes. It's got to be safe, reliable, do the job, and I'm sorry, I don't build the lightest bike in the world, I build the strongest, straightest, functional, safest bike I can possibly make.

Charlie Vogelheim: Awesome.

Steve Potts: I get guys come in here and they go, "Well I'm 280, my fighting weight is you know, like normally around 230, I'm 6-foot-4, and I want you to build me the lightest bike that's going to do all these things." And I'm going, "What we really need to do is make you a bike that fits your needs, that's absolutely safe and reliable and you're not going to get hurt on. And no, I can't tell you what your bike's going to weigh. Weight's going to be a byproduct of good engineering, and I'm not going to make you the lightest bike in the world. I'm going to make you the safest, most reliable, good-feeling bike you ever had, but I'm not going to give you a weight on your bike." We don't build for weight. We build for reliability and function. And so a lot of guys will just walk away. They'll go, "Well he wouldn't make me a light bike." But then the guys that he's talking to say, "Yeah, he's going to make you a bike that's safe and reliable, that's what he's going to make you." So I'm fine with that. And I really haven't lost any sales over that. Maybe one or two guys that were like, "Well I want to know exactly what it's going to weigh," and "I want this tube and that tube," and it's all funny. I try to be gracious to people. I understand what they're looking for. I'll say, "I'll make you possibly the lightest bike I can make that will be safe and reliable for you."

Charlie Vogelheim: Joe Breeze, who we've talked about several times, said out loud, "Nobody makes a better bike than –"

Steve Potts: Oh, thanks, yeah.

Debra Schwartz: A better friend than Steve Potts.

Steve Potts: Oh, that's sweet. Yeah, Joe told me one time, he says, "God, Steve, I can't believe you're still building bikes. That's a lot of work. You are absolutely out of your mind." But you know, because Joe is a hard worker. Joe and I worked hard together. Matter of fact, I worked with Kent Erickson too, who's somebody I really respect. Kent and I were like magic working together. You've never seen two guys produce so many bikes. He lost his welder a few years ago, and I went over there. They flew me out there and I worked for a month with Kent, and we produced more bikes and we just had this energy. And Joe Breeze is the same way. Joe Breeze is such a hard worker. When we were working, he was diligent and worked so hard. I mean he really kind of set the mold for me. Very hard worker.

Charlie Vogelheim: Okay. We've got a full card here.

Debra Schwartz: Yes, wow. Okay. So well I'm still recording here, so I'm going to ask one more question here. I think we've pretty much covered the back history and your

professional life. Steve, is there any question that we haven't asked now that you wish we had? Is there anything you need to say?

Steve Potts: Let me see. No, I think you did really good. Probably the wonderful question a lot of people ask is, "What was the most important thing to you in your life?" That was a good question. And that would be being a good father and trying to help make independently thinking, responsible, young men that have integrity was my most important job. And I'm sure I've fallen short in areas, we all do. We all make mistakes until you learn. But, you know, none of us went to college to be parents. When was the last time you went to college and heard, "parenting." You know, Parenting 101.

Debra Schwartz: Taught by a single person.

Steve Potts: Yeah, taught by a single person. With a college degree.

Charlie Vogelheim: Intern.

Steve Potts: Yeah, an intern.

Debra Schwartz: Graduate school.

Steve Potts: But anyway, no, I think you really covered it. I don't think there's anything that you didn't cover.

Debra Schwartz: Is there anything that you would say in regard to what Mill Valley has given to you? What has Mill Valley given to you as a person?

Steve Potts: Well Mill Valley, you know, that's a really good question. First and foremost, Mill Valley is a geographical area that happens to be incredibly beautiful. And of course my memories of that, geographically, will never change. But what's happened is the people will change. Growing up as a kid, a lot of ways, Mill Valley was a lot more balanced, as far as who filled up this wonderful place called Mill Valley. It was filled with more craftsman people, and now it's more filled in with – it's a desirable, beautiful place to live for a lot of reasons that we just spoke about. So it's filled in with a lot of people who can afford to do that, which is not bad in itself, but it attracts people that want to live in a beautiful place and a lot of what Mill Valley has turned into is not so appealing. I went and visited some old childhood friends, and we decided to meet in downtown Mill Valley for dinner at one of the places where I used to buy my gym shorts and stuff as a kid, at the old Mayer's play store. It's a nice restaurant, but –

Charlie Vogelheim: Which one's that?

Steve Potts: Was it D'Angelos? Yeah. And I felt like I was in Hollywood. It was a scene to be seen. Somebody drove up in a beautiful Lamborghini and they revved it up so everybody would look at them. The music was on full blast and they let their gorgeous model-like girlfriend, who I'm sure was a very nice person, get out of the car, and there

was just a huge spectacle. And while they go off and park the car, then somebody else comes up in their fancy Harley and the same thing. Like revs it up so everybody can see, and there was nothing subtle about it. And then it was just hard to see a little bit. It was all about being seen. And I'm sure there's more going on. The people are absolutely wonderful. I'm not mad at anybody or don't think any less of them. But it's a different focus of importance. And the importance was is everyone's dressed to the T's, and everybody's putting on their best, and they're all out – it's all good, it's just different.

Debra Schwartz: It's not what you got from Mill Valley.

Steve Potts: No, it's not what I got from Mill Valley. And you know for me, it's just different. It's not just better or worse. Like I said, it's more of a – instead of going to somebody's house and having a conversation for dinner, it's more of like a Facebook experience, where it's a virtual. You're going to do this thing that's all flashy and it happens really quick and then it's over. Instead of going to somebody's house where, when I was a kid, my parents would take us to our friends' house. And they would sit here on the table, and they would talk and have coffee for hours. And they talked about everything. These little kids were going, "Wow, what are they talking about?" And we just couldn't believe they didn't want to go outside and climb trees and play hide-and-go-seek with us.

Okay, but so as I get older, for me what's special is like going to your house and sitting at the kitchen table while you're cooking and talking to Willie about what's going on, or work, or bikes, or his health or your back or what's going on in the world. For me, that's a more meaningful, intimate experience than being seen downtown where everybody's going really fast, and they're putting on their best But it's a different thing, and it's very crowded and distracting and you're talking to this person, and then that person, and then next thing you know, you've left and they're over at the bar talking to –. It's all fun, don't get me wrong, it's all fun and it has its place, but there's less of a real connection and more of just a memory of a scene. It's like old days, when we watch movies, they went slow and there was a character connection. You got to know who the good guy was and the bad guy, and nowadays you go to a movie and it's in millisecond bites of action and sound and impressive, you know, summersaults and amazing things.

So my point is, is Mill Valley has become more of a sound bite than a real intimate experience. And that's a little heartbreaking, because I did have a wonderful, intimate experience in Mill Valley two weeks ago. I went to the Old Mill Valley Lumber Company, which I adored, and the new owner, Matt, called me, said, "We're having a little barbeque," with the bicycle, and I went there, and Matt took the time, we walked around. I went up in the old room where the band saw was. I went up and he showed me his office and we went and looked at the creek where the fish used to be, and we had a burger together and we sat down. I met some old friends, and that was a really wonderful Mill Valley experience. It was about just being grateful for the fact that he's preserving that building in its state, which I was terrified would be condos someday. And I'm so grateful that they did that.

So there are wonderful things happening and trying to preserve it. I remember when my grandpa left Mill Valley, through Tam Valley, he says, "Grandma and I are moving." I was shocked. This is 1968 or '67 or '69. I said, "Why are you moving?" He

says, “Aw, Grandma, we can’t even buy a pair of work pants in downtown Mill Valley anymore, and the hardware store is gone to hell.” Everything was becoming – he could see it coming. Everything was changing. And then they moved to Calistoga when it was a sleepy little town before it got discovered. The only thing was there was all these little funky shops, and a couple old funky spas and the public pool that had the heated water, and the heliport where the parachuters and gliders went off. Other than that, it was a sleepy little town. They’ve lived on Harley Street, and they played cards in the afternoon, and it was a quiet little sleepy town. Well of course it got discovered, and it’s now the world-famous Napa Valley winemaking 24/7, spas, restaurants. I’m not saying that stuff is bad, but for me, it goes by way too quick. It’s like that was really fun, but it’s over. It all happened way too fast, and there was so much input that you couldn’t connect to anything. Do you know what I’m saying?

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah, definitely.

Steve Potts: And so what my whole thing is, is I enjoyed living, growing in the old Mill Valley which was slow, and it was more intimate and you connected, and it went at a more normal pace of life. Now everything is coming at us so fast. These poor kids have so much information available that they don’t even know how to work out a beef with their buddy because they haven’t had that physical –. Like I say, when I grew up as kids, we got to go out, our mom would say, “Come back before dark.” You’d go out, you’d climb trees, you’d catch pollywogs, you’d get in a fight with your friend, you’d learn how to make up and work it out, you’d become best friends again. But you actually got to go through the process of living. Like you learned that it wasn’t good to be selfish, or you learned that it wasn’t good to say something mean to somebody because it hurt their feelings. And you learned that it wasn’t so great to get in that fight because you really hurt your friend and now you had to figure out how to make up. And what I’m getting at is life was more foundationally glued together. You know, it’s like growing the garden. You actually had to go out and plant the plants and water them and get the weeds out, and then you had food on the table. Now everything is so instant. And Mill Valley is still a wonderful place. I absolutely love it and nobody will take those memories away, but everything is more instant. And when I go there, I feel like I’m in a modern movie where sound bits and everything is coming at me so fast. I can’t even absorb it. I’m like, “What just happened?” I had friends with – two of my friends, and we only had five minutes of conversation, because there were so many distractions and so much going on, and so much input, that I missed everything. Where when I grew up, it’s like, you know we’re going to go to the so-and-so’s for dinner, and it was more grounded.

But Mill Valley is a wonderful place. It always will be. And it’s not just Mill Valley, it’s the world in general, it’s Petaluma, it’s Point Reyes, it’s everywhere you go, is people have grown up. You know, one of the things that’s happening in Point Reyes, it’s so beautiful there, just like everything. It’s getting loved to death. And Mill Valley got loved to death. People are putting up big, spectacular homes and blah blah blah, which is all fine. It’s just a different world. And you know what’ll happen soon in Point Reyes is a tour bus will go through for the three-and-a-half million. And they’ll say, “This is where they used to raise cattle, and this is where they used to raise oysters, and this is where they milked the cows, and this is the barn that used to be the milking barn,

and this is the place where they caught fish, and this is the place that they collected the eggs, and this is the place where they made cheese." It'll become Disneyland. Because people are less and less connected. So they want the character that actually built the town. What actually built Mill Valley was hard work, the lumber industry, you know the craftsmen, the stuff. And now it's a place where things used to happen, but now we just enjoy the image of that. Because it has that character. I mean, when you go into Mill Valley, you just go. This place is unbelievably beautiful, this little town nestled against the mountain, protected, and it's just gorgeous. And the creek going through town, and you know, there's some comfort to that. But a lot of that is changing because everybody wants a piece of that character. And so what you have is people are flooding in and the places that used to be the lumber, now are all condos for 50 people. So you've got 70 more cars in town, and you've got, you know, what I'm getting at is it gets to be to where it's no longer what it was, and so it's kind of, you know –

Debra Schwartz: Okay.

Steve Potts: I could go on and on.

Charlie Vogelheim: Yeah. Thank you, Steve, thank you so much for giving us this interview, and I just want to say that you are a true original. Really a good-hearted, reliable model built for dependability and fun. Thank you so much for all of your memories and all the good times, and we'll see you on the 20th.

Steve Potts: Yeah. I guess I would be a 1950 Chevrolet truck if I was an old reliable –

Debra Schwartz: With an engine and a heart that never stops working. Okay, we've got it.

Steve Potts: Thanks you guys.

Debra Schwartz: Thank you, Steve.