

A salute to Cottage Dads

For hardcore putterers like Joe V., maintaining a lakeside paradise isn't a burden, it's a purpose

BY TRISTAN BRONCA

THERE ARE EXACTLY three kinds of people who buy a cottage. The first kind is the one who pays. They buy newer properties, boats, and toys, and for what little upkeep or repairs are required, they shell out for them. The second kind is the one who came to the cottage without any idea whatsoever what they were getting into. This person doesn't or can't pay for help until they absolutely must and simply muddles along with half-broken things until they are beyond salvaging or until they break and quit the cottage forever (that'd be me).

The third kind is someone like my father-in-law.

These are fixers, the do-it-yourselfers, the people who see all the work there is to do around the house and say, "I need more of this, but older, and with the additional maintenance associated with untamed nature and large bodies of water." These are the people who will work a 50-hour week and then trek another hour-and-a-half up to the cottage to make sure the PWCs haven't ended up on the neighbour's beach and the raccoons didn't get into the garbage again. For this person, cottage chores aren't really chores; they do not do them in order to eventually sit back and enjoy the place, because that would mean that at some point, they sit back and enjoy the place. No, for this person, the work is the point.

I call this person "the Cottage Dad" (though you don't need to be a dad, or even a man to fit the mould). If you were a taxonomist looking for the archetype, someone who embodied the idea of the Cottage Dad, your search would begin and end with my father-in-law, Joe V.

Joe V. has a work ethic unlike anyone I know. During the week, he runs a marketing agency which regularly places demands on his time outside of standard



working hours. When he does have an evening off, he is often lugging his tools to one of his three daughters' houses to spend hours on some home improvement project: installing a backsplash, building a deck, replacing plumbing, eliminating the squeak in an old wooden staircase with dozens of shims and about 600 nails. When my wife and I moved into our home in 2021, he took it upon himself to install crown moulding in our sunroom while we were at a wedding. He's even floated the idea of starting his own handyman service where he does this work for other people. You know, during his downtime.

The cottage is his happy place, partially because it is where he gets to fish and primarily because it is where he wages war on the forces that upset the working order of things. Take his boats, for example. Joe V. has only spent a few thousand dollars on his larger cruisers. He has accomplished this feat by buying used boats of occasionally questionable function and selling his slightly older, slightly more questionably functioning boat for only slightly less money. Of course, this sometimes leads to problems like "boat won't start" for reasons only Joe V. can diagnose, but under his care these machines have generally served him well. >>

Even on the exceedingly rare occasion that Joe V. must hire someone, as he did with the landscaping when the water level rose and threatened to flood the basement, he is right in there, making sure things are being done how he expects them to be done. Which is to say, at 65 years old, he is doing the heavy lifting for people he hired to do the heavy lifting.

By the time I was introduced to this family more than 10 years ago, they already had a term for that which met Joe V.'s lofty quality and safety standards: "Joe V.-approved." Something that is not Joe V.-approved does not necessarily mean it is unsafe or at risk of damage or theft, it just means you haven't taken all the steps that Joe V. would to be absolutely certain. Locking up the jet ski? You better believe Joe V. is going to check it, and if you only looped the rope through the lift once, he'll redo it and loop it through twice. When most people install a dock in the spring, I imagine they eyeball the water level, make sure the dock is secure and mostly straight, then move on with their day. Not Joe V. As the dock settles in the ensuing weeks, Joe V. will study the water levels with a near-academic intensity. For every adjustment, he's there, measuring tape in hand, making sure the underside of that dock has at least 27 inches of clearance.

Occasionally, we go to the cottage with just our friends. Joe V., in his grace, allows us to take out the boat. My wife, aged 31, still feels uncomfortable doing so, having internalized Joe V.'s cautions of shoals, safety checklists, and police. After we left one Sunday night, I couldn't be 100 per cent sure that I had left the boat key where Joe V. typically leaves it. That night I had trouble sleeping.

Still, I understand why Joe V. is Joe V. The cottage can be a chaotic place, especially this particular cottage. Some weekends there are eight adults, two babies, a toddler, and three dogs under a single roof. It's loud. Prepping for a day trip on the water takes a while, but we cram it in between breakfast and whenever we manage to leave. Joe V.'s predilection for preparedness doesn't exactly speed things up, but it does seem to help fewer things go wrong.



And Joe V. has seen things go wrong before. His boat has been knocked off its lift, which explains the numerous strategically placed, but probably redundant, straps. Other docks in the bay have been swept off their moorings. Last year, after more than a decade in these waters, I accidentally steered Joe V.'s boat over some submerged rocks that he has warned me about approximately 73 times—a mistake that cost me a replacement propeller. On one occasion, years ago, Joe V. was fishing with his own father-in-law when a storm hit. They came across an over-packed tin boat taking on water, and the passengers didn't have any lifejackets. If they hadn't been there to help, one of the men in that little eight-foot skiff might well have drowned.

But you other Cottage Dads already know Joe V.'s idiosyncrasies and supposed excesses are warranted. I am the opposite of the Cottage Dad, which is to

say lazy and usually laid back. I tend to respond to objections about my handiwork or general lack of preparedness with some variation of "it's fine." Before I met Joe V., I thought the cottage was a place to relax. I now know better.

I've since learned a few other things too: how to install the dock; how to get an 800-pound boat lift into the freezing spring water with two guys, a barrel, and a hand truck; how to tie off a boat; how at least some of the things I usually replace I can instead fix with some effort, patience, and perhaps a phone call to Joe V. But most importantly, Joe V. taught me that the work is usually worth it if the people who enjoy this place keep coming back. 🐾

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