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New to RI: Hitting the slopes at Yawgoo Valley with the chairman of the (snow)board

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The Providence Journal

Published 5:01 a.m. ET Feb. 4, 2022

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EXETER — Age is just a number. Especially if your name is Peter Pan.

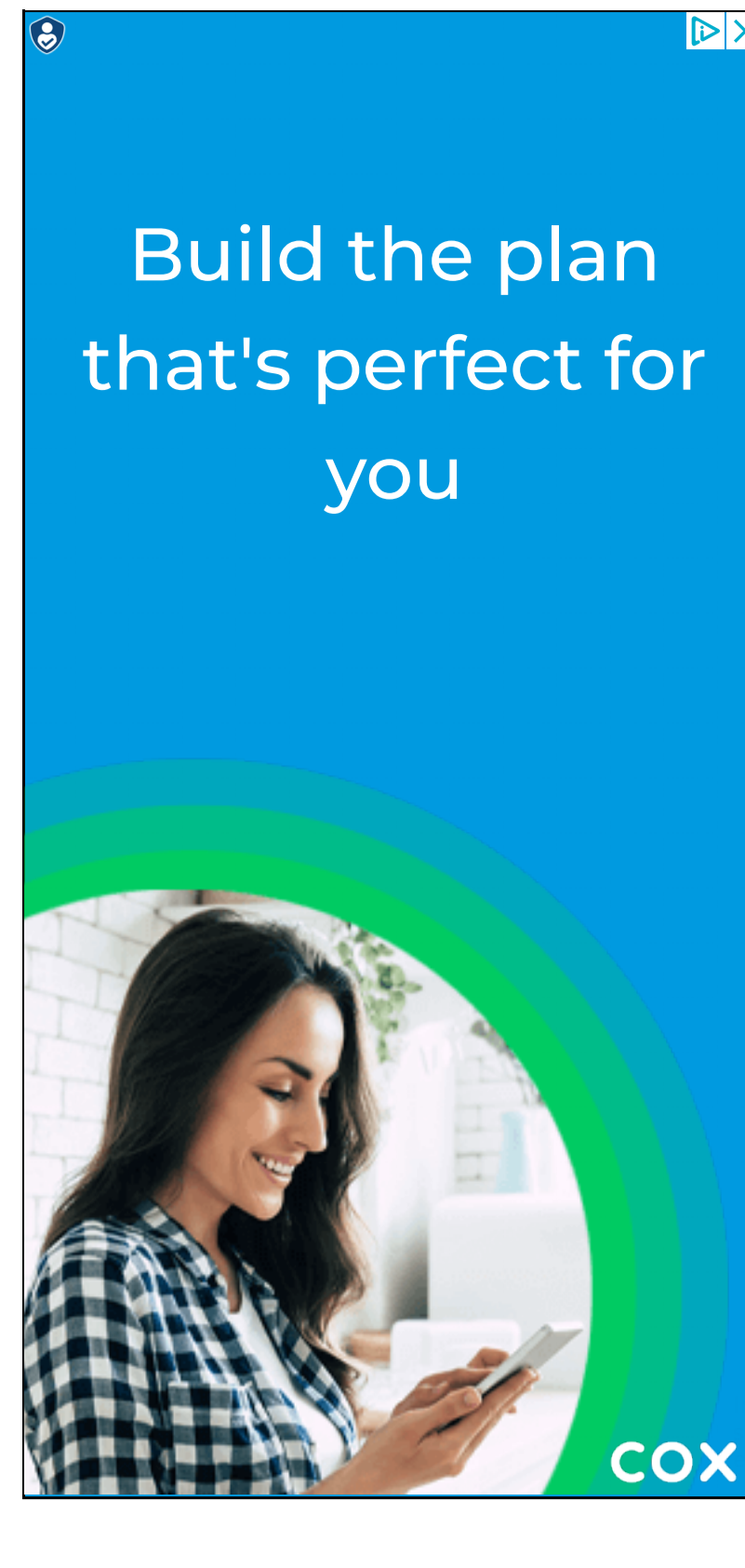
That's what locals have been calling [Peter Panagiotis](#) since 1967, when he showed up at a surfing contest in Newport.

"The announcer couldn't pronounce my name," Panagiotis recalled. "So he goes, 'Peter Pan ...' And that was it after that. He said it one time."

It's fitting for an East Coast surf legend who, while approaching his 72nd trip around the sun, is still getting on the board year round, winter included. For 28 of those years, Panagiotis has been a snowboard instructor at [Yawgoo Valley](#), Rhode Island's only ski resort, located in Exeter.

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Journal reporter Amy Russo, in foreground, gets a snowboarding lesson from surf legend Peter Panagiotis at Yawgoo Valley Ski Area in Exeter. David DalPao/The Providence Journal

That's where I met Panagiotis, who offered to give me a lesson. Two hours and a bruised tailbone later, I knew how to schuss down a slightly elevated knoll alongside a children's obstacle course. This is no easy sport, but when you're learning, it's all about the small victories.

Step one is dressing for the occasion. Panagiotis supplied rental boots, snow pants and two pairs of gloves — one of which I mysteriously lost somewhere between the 20 feet that separate the ski lodge and the slopes, and the other which I wore.

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Having managed to finally gear up, I was off to my practice knoll. The tricky thing about snowboarding, besides everything, is figuring out how to stand up once you strap your boots onto the board. The easiest way is to lie down on the ground and in one swift motion, flip onto your stomach, then push yourself up to a standing position while you avoid slipping down the mountain — or knoll, in my case — by leaning forward on your toes. But don't lean forward too much, or instead of sliding down the mountain, you'll slide onto your face.

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I managed to do this for about five seconds before gradually slipping down the hill, veering right, and descending slowly into a ditch. Panagiotis, who I must say is an exceptionally patient person, proceeded to put himself in the same predicament, intentionally, in order to show me how to get out of it.

Having met the first challenge — standing up after attaching her boots to the board, Russo makes her first attempt on the kiddie slope. David DalPao

My mind instantly flashed to scenes of golfers whose shots land in sand traps, forcing them to struggle repeatedly to gouge it out of the ground while onlookers wince.

Thankfully, this was easier. Hoisting myself up from the ditch, I made it back onto the slope, where eventually I was able to complete a couple of successful runs before retreating into the lodge.

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For Panagiotis, this is old hat, a sport he describes as the closest thing to his true love: surfing. When he's not at Yawgoo, Panagiotis designs surfboards, an occupation he's held for years, his creations produced by BIC Sport Surfboards and Hobie, California's first surf shop.

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To this day, Hobie still sells a [Peter Pan Slug](#), named after none other than Panagiotis, who was initially mocked when he tried to sell the idea in the 1980s.

"They said, 'We're going to put your name on it, because it's such an ugly board that we want everyone to know that you designed it,'" Panagiotis said. Decades later, the name remains.

Aside from surfing and slopes, Panagiotis can be found paddleboarding, teaching tae kwon do or jabbing his way through a round of kickboxing.

One thing he hates in the world of athletics: trends.

"The gyms go by fads," he said. "Now it's yoga."

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Panagiotis, known by the nickname Peter Pan, gives Russo the benefit of his 28 years as a snowboarding instructor at Yawgoo Valley. David DalPao/The Providence Journal

Panagiotis still remembers an argument with a Zumba enthusiast who asserted that she burned 800 calories per class. In response, he told her she was full of something other than the truth.

While Panagiotis shows no signs of slowing down, there's one thing he retired from at age 40.

"I used to skateboard all the time," he said. "Half pipes, everything. And then I saw people getting mangled, so I said I'm not doing that."

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Providence Journal staff writer Amy Russo moved from New York City last March, and she's eager to experience her adopted state. If you have suggestions for this column, email her at amrusso@providencejournal.com.

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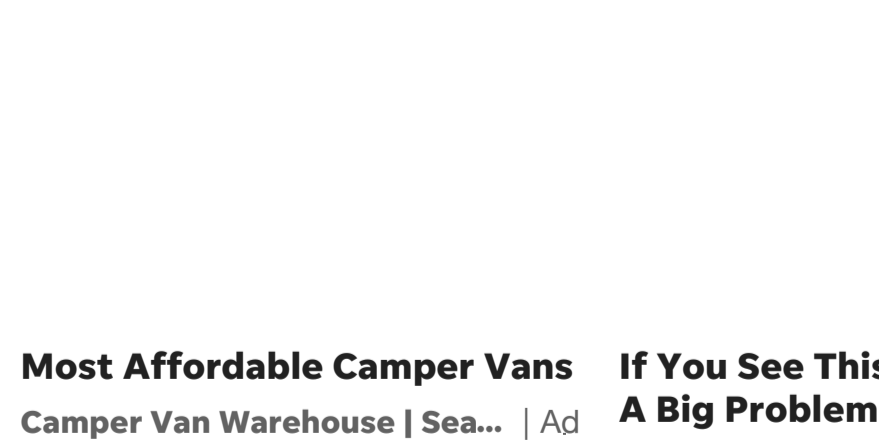
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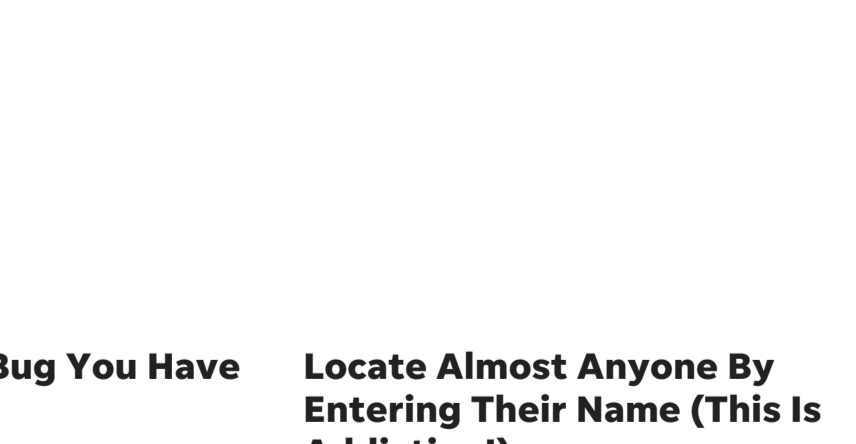
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