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Port Townsend Shipwright's Co-op finisher Melyana Nordstrom hard at work on the "Evening Star."
Photo courtesy of Melanya Nordstrom



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From mountaineer to shipwright to instructor Bruce Blatchley's story

By James Sloan
jsloan@ptleader.com

Bruce Blatchley was dog-tired of living out of a backpack and a Subaru.

He was a seasonal mountaineer guide leading climbers over the magnificent mountain peaks of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, climbing icy zeniths wherever he went. Blatchley had conquered Mount Denali, Mount Rainier, and any environment in front of him — except for a stable environment to call home.

Although the mountaineer life was “a hell of a lot of fun” for Blatchley, he needed a steady career away from from the sierra.

Seeking a job where he could work in a tactile capacity, Blatchley eventually settled as a carpenter in Bellingham. Working in the construction industry proved to be right up Blatchley's alley, as he enjoyed working with his hands and constructing numerous projects from foundation to finishing touches.

While in Bellingham, Blatchley eventually met a man by the name of Ernie Baird, a shipwright and doyen of Port Townsend's maritime community for more than 50 years. “He got me into sailboats,” Blatchley recalled. “I was eager to learn.”

After learning more and more about the maritime trade, Blatchley was eventually offered a job to work for Baird as a shipwright in Port Townsend.

He moved to Port Townsend in December 1997, and worked for Baird for the next 2½

see *Blatchley*, Page 12

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Melanya Nordstrom will bring a decade of experience in boatbuilding to the board of the Port Townsend Marine Trades Association for her first term.
Leader photo by Laura Jean Schneider

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By Laura Jean Schneider
ljschneider@ptleader.com

Two folks joining the Port Townsend Marine Trades Association board this fall will be some of the youngest members yet.

Melanya Nordstrom, a finisher for the Port Townsend Shipwright's Co-op, was recruited by shipwright Diana Taley. Pete Stein, who recently started a collective of skilled boat people, caught the eye of current board member Robert D'Arcy.

Both in their early 30s, the two are excited about serving an annual term with the marine volunteer-run nonprofit.

"I lucked out and found some older mentors here in the yard," Stein said during a recent conversation.

He and Nordstrom sat under an awning in front of Sunrise Coffee Company, sipping mochas topped with generous froths of whipped cream as rain drizzled down.

Stein's path to the marine trades included apprenticeships,

"tailgating" old-timers and learning by doing.

"I've worked in both of the big shops here," he said of Boat Haven.

But working for others wasn't his larger dream, where he envisioned himself "working for myself or running my own shop."

He decided to start his own business when he turned 30, currently under his name, in the old Shipwright's Co-op building.

"I'd rather start now, and build it up," he stated matter-of-factly.

Although Stein is exclusively a carpenter, a handful of independent craftspeople who share the building with him provide varied services that allow complete vessel overhaul.

Nordstrom has a relationship with the Marine Trades Association that goes back to her high school years, when they awarded her a scholarship to attend the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding.

"I lucked out and found some older mentors here in the yard."

Pete Stein

MEMBER, PORT TOWNSEND
MARINE TRADES ASSOCIATION



Pete Stein, who learned boatbuilding by working with experienced shipwrights, is looking forward to taking a volunteer position on the board of the Port Townsend Marine Trades Association. *Leader photo by Laura Jean Schneider*

She sees a future in the marine trades; according to a 2018 economic impact study prepared by Martin Associates, 2,243 jobs in Jefferson County flowed from the waterfront.

"I intend on being here long-term," she said.

As with Stein, Nordstrom owns a home in the area, but expressed concern that housing shortages are hedging out skilled craftspeople. The Trades Association has the ability to draw more attention to the fact that housing is a problem, she added.

As the boatbuilding and repair sector of the county's marine trades sector brings in a whopping 60 percent of the total revenue, and provides nearly 20 percent of county jobs, boat folks are feeling the crunch.

The two craftspeople feel they were sought out to carry

forward a rich tradition.

"The next generation," they said in unison, both breaking into smiles.

Then they got serious.

"Aside from any threat of the port no longer being a port," Nordstrom said, "I kind of leave the infrastructure to the professionals."

Stein added that his biggest concern, too, is that the port will sell to developers who can lay down big bucks for the waterfront property.

Their characteristic optimism returned as they polished off their coffee, speculating on their new roles.

"I want to do a boatyard Olympics," Nordstrom said.



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Fashioning function

Sailor's dreams from tailor's seams

By Laura Jean Schneider
ljschneider@ptleader.com

Fashion school drop-out Randi Whipple has found a way to seamlessly transfer a love of textiles into a sailor's dream.

All but trapped in Ilwaco, Washington during COVID, where her sailboat and business namesake the Windwitch, was hauled out, Whipple buckled down to sew face masks – with her designer's touch, they were spotted by the fashion blog Refinery 29.

Recently, Whipple has been able to return to her pre-pandemic product line. While housesitting in Portland for a friend with a leather sewing machine, she fashioned totes, sailor's tool bags, zipped pouches, you name it. Using stainless hardware, reinforced bases, and a big ol' zipper tracking across the mouth, she honed a bag line that wasn't exactly what she'd thought of in fashion school.

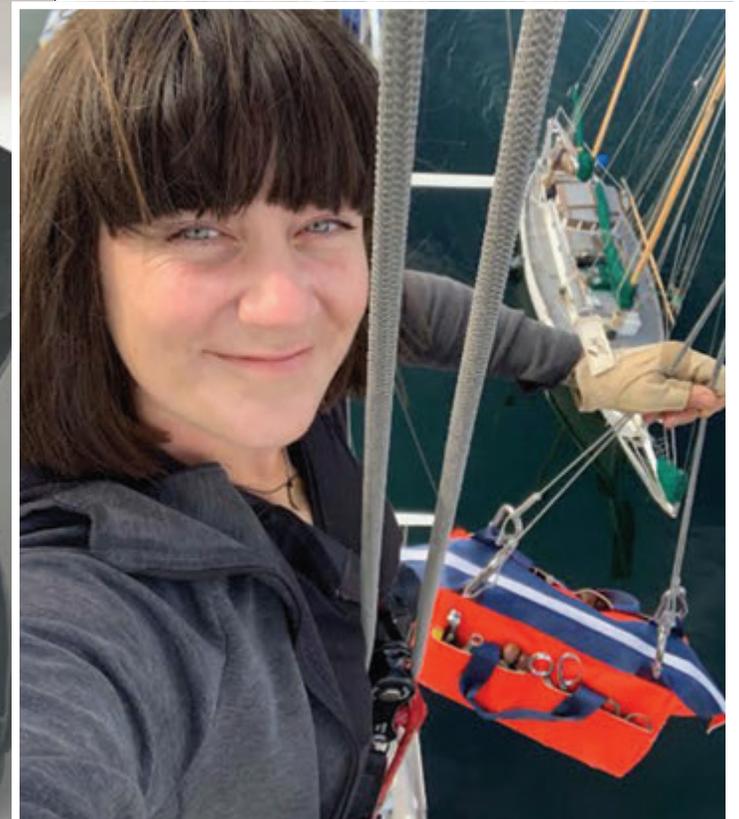
"I'm not a traditional learner," Whipple said. In Portland, she found fashion school confining, and found a niche apprenticing for a car upholstery company in the city instead. She continued to work in the fashion industry doing makeup and hair, but she loved textiles.

Whipple stepped on her first boat at age 25, and spent significant time as a crew member on boats from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

"I could find work in any country," she said, because she could sew.

After living on small boats for five years, mold had destroyed half of her belongings. One item, however, had taken a beating yet still functioned beautifully: her tool bag.

Whipple made it herself, using scraps of bright orange leather leftover from a series of neon furniture. There seemed to be



Randi Whipple perches atop the 73-foot mast of the "Wolfhound," owned by Steven and Louise Dew in Port Townsend.

Custom sewer Randi Whipple uses her dog to illustrate the size and durability of her hand-sewn tool bags.. *Photos courtesy of Randi Whipple*

something magical about the material: come hell, and certainly high water, it held up beautifully, and was impervious to mold.

She'd grown tired of canvas sea bags that disintegrated over time, bags with rusted parts, bags with gaping pockets where tools seemed to jump out and disappear. She spoke to the need for everything on a boat having multiple uses: when pared to the minimum, anything that makes it on-board needs to earn its keep. As a descendant of mechanics and carpenters, Whipple was adamant about practicality.

"I'm a minimalist," she said.

She's spent half of her lifetime sewing, and she's been working with leather from the age of 21. Whipple insists on using only stainless steel for the metal components of each bag. Anything else will corrode over time. One of her trademark attributes is a zipper closure to keep contents from spilling out, something that has happened to her more times than she'd like to admit. Always with the working person in mind, Whipple added four attachment points to her tool bag, allowing it to be rigged and sent up a mast.

While she has expanded to include two semi-waterproof leathers in brown and black, she stands behind the high visibility orange as being mold-proof.

"I destroy things," she said, laughing. If they pass the Randi test, then she feels confident that her tool bags can hold up to whatever else comes their way. "It makes me feel really good," she said of creating a high quality product. "I want to make something that's useful."

Windwitch bags are truly slow fashion: each one is made by hand, and it takes about a week to finish each tool bag. They are made to order, and range from \$65 for a large pouch, to \$750 for the largest tool bag/tote. Her materials alone cost what

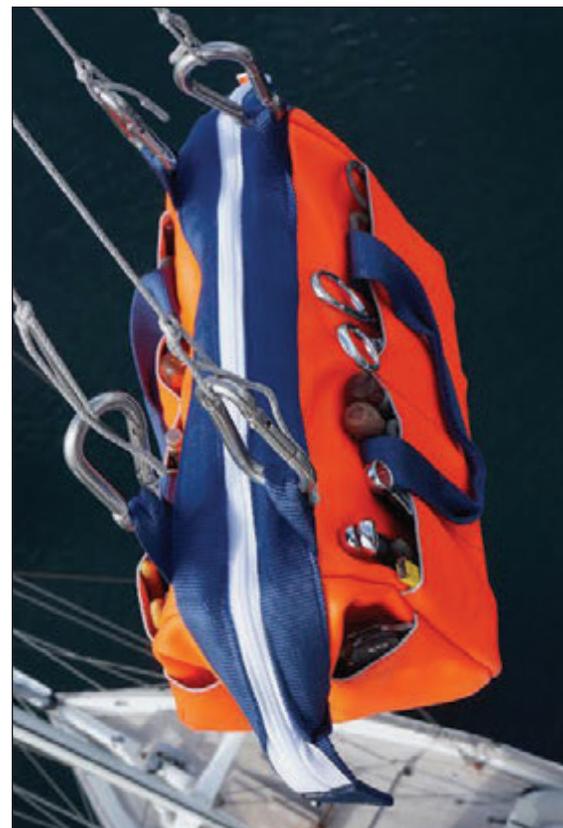


Windwitch bags come in three colors of upholstery-grade leather, sewn with marine grade UV resistant thread.

many high-quality canvas bags fetch retail, and she stands by her products. Zippers can be replaced, and repairs can be made, keeping the bag out of the landfill and in working hands. They are bags for and by a sailor, and she's proud of that fact.

Whipple moved to Port Townsend in July, and she already feels at home. She noted that the city is known for its openness to women in the maritime trades. It's nice to be part of a community that cares about craftsmanship and art, she added. After seeing the response to her product line, she said she's making this gig her full-time job. "People are going to want these, here," she said with confidence.

Find Whipple's full line of hand-sewn leather goods online at thewindwitch.com.



Windwitch tool bags, named after sewer and sailor Randi Whipple's sailboat, are equipped with four attachment points that allow for easy transfer while working on a mast.

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By Laura Jean Schneider
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Ali Redman's hands are as much at home in salt water as the endangered abalone she's helping to rear in captivity.

As she bent over a tank of juvenile pinto abalone at the Port Townsend Marine Science Center, she trailed a small piece of kelp through the water, tempting the tiny marine snails with the freshly torn edge.

Careful focus — most of the shells were less than 1/4-inch-long — revealed enthusiastic appeal for the slice of bull kelp. Several tiny creatures scooted toward the green strand, their epipodium, or hair-width food-sensing tentacles, on their single muscular foot, waving.

"They have little faces," she said, engrossed.

The abalone left little white squiggles on the sediment at the bottom of their shallow tank, their almost-invisible stalked eyes bobbing.

However minute these *Haliotis kamschatkana* are, they are a big deal.

This September, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife drafted the first-ever recovery plan for the only abalone found in Washington. Two years ago, the pinto abalone, sometimes called the northern abalone, was added to the Washington state endangered species list. Without a supplementation program to augment the dwindling wild population, the species will likely face extirpation, a fancier way of saying extinction.

To date, only one pinto abalone, a juvenile, has been observed by research divers in Washington since 2008.

A CHANCE TO SURVIVE

Redman has worked at the Marine Science Center based at Fort Worden for five years. She earned a degree in marine conservation and science from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego before heading back to her home state and landing a job in Port Townsend.

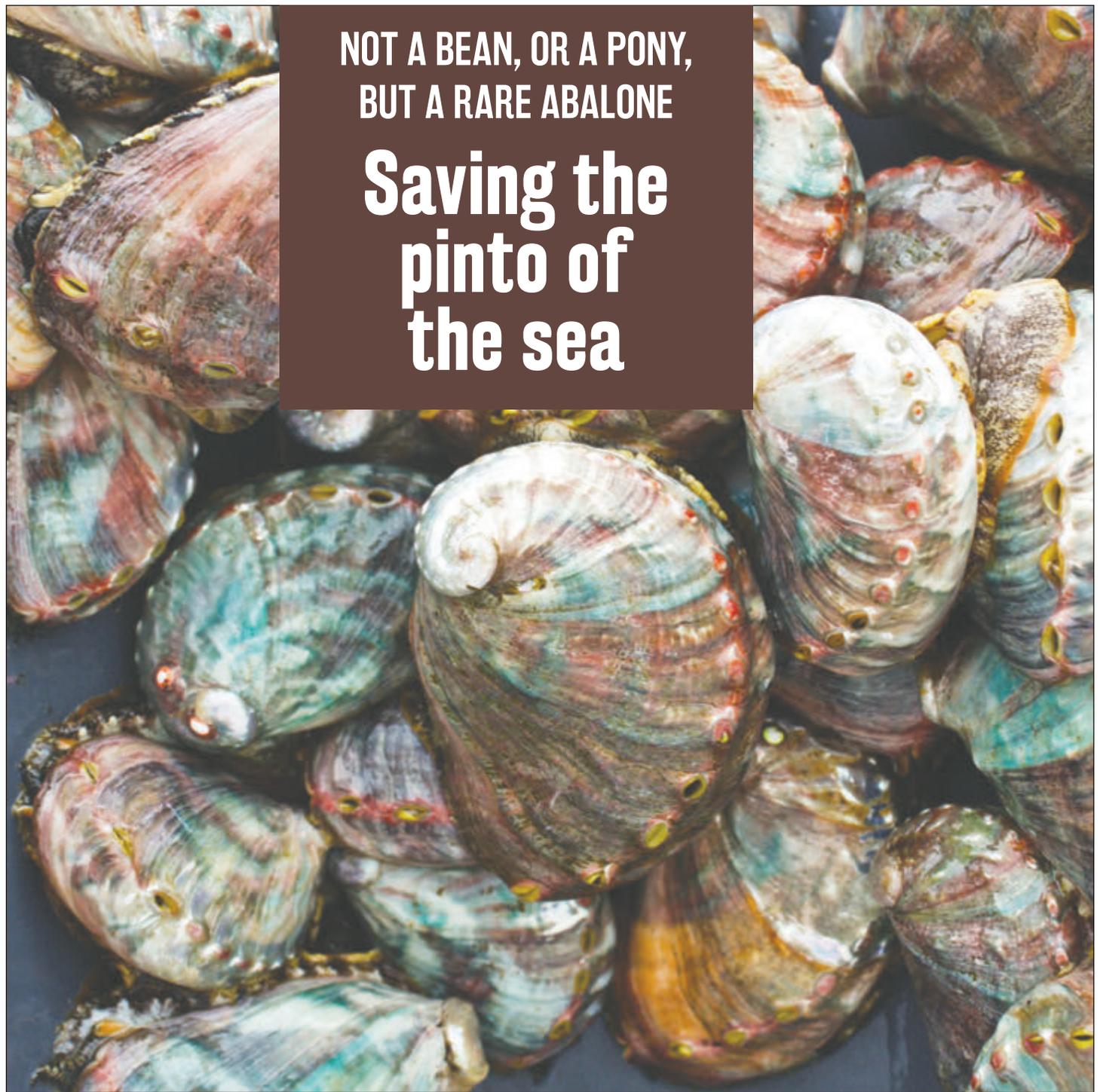
The pinto abalone satellite project (currently at just two locations, the science center and the Seattle Aquarium), is critical to the success of an abalone outplanting program, where 1- to 2-year-old abalone who have been raised in captivity are released into the wild.

Overfishing for the delectable meat and beautiful shells is blamed for the disappearance of the now-rare abalone, as well as two major ecological events. Sea stars died in droves between 2014 and 2015 when a wasting disease hit hard. Coupled with unusually warm water from an El Niño, which killed off massive colonies of bull kelp, an imbalance occurred. Purple sea urchins, whose main predator is the sea star and who compete with the abalone for kelp, soon created urchin barrens, effectively over-grazing the sea algae and reducing abalone habitat.

According to the state's recovery plan, bull kelp populations have been declining along the West Coast in the past decade,

NOT A BEAN, OR A PONY,
BUT A RARE ABALONE

Saving the pinto of the sea



This cluster of pinto abalone show off the stunning colors of their exterior shells. The holes are used for respiration and reproduction. Some of these individuals carry small, orange marker tags. Photo courtesy of the Port Townsend Marine Science Center

and it further states: "It is imperative to acknowledge that pinto abalone recovery is dependent on the survival of kelp forests."

Redman explained why this is important.

"They're habitat architects," she said. "Because they're going around, grazing on algae, they are helping maintain a rocky reef balance."

These aggregate, mostly sedentary creatures are also dioecious spawners, which means that with both sexes broadcasting sperm or eggs, there is a need for a certain population density and proximity in order to be viable. The baby pintos begin as larvae feeding off of the eggs' yolks, before looking for settling cues that a certain biofilm on a crustose

coralline emits. Once attached, they begin the metamorphosis into a crawling juvenile.

SLOWLY GAINING

The three shallow tanks of pinto abalone Redman looks after are in this juvenile stage.

The center's location right on the water allows for an open flow-through water circulation system, cycling water through the tanks from the bay below.

The Puget Sound Restoration Fund, which has worked with Fish and Wildlife since 2002 to troubleshoot saving the pinto abalone, delivered 1,500 captive-bred tiny abalone to the

Marine Science Center in May, at the delicate age of 9 months old.

"It's our biggest batch yet," Redman said.

Staff measure a subset from each tank, which contain genetically separate batches, monthly to track growth.

"Genetic diversity is really important to the restoration process," she said, adding that all of the little juveniles are referred as "F-1s," the offspring of two wild-caught adults.

When they are large enough, a brightly colored marker dot (the same used to track bees) is adhered with what Redman called "coral glue," a super glue used in coral restoration.

She picked up a pinto abalone shell from a nearby shelf, showing the tell-tale pinto color splotches on the back, pointing to a small, ½-inch-long rectangle embedded in the outer shell. Just like the rest of the shell's interior, the little rectangle was coated in iridescent nacre, commonly known as mother of pearl.

That rectangle, she said, was a PIT, or a passive integrated transponder, a micro-chip that would allow divers to account for individuals in areas where visibility was limited.

HOPEFUL FUTURE

The 18-month-old abalone will return to the restoration fund next March, and a new cohort will be welcomed. Redman said there are plans for expanding the capacity of the satellite program, as the results from the past two years have been encouraging.

Since 2009, around 40,000 genetically diverse

Ali Redman's hands are as much at home in salt water as the endangered abalone she's helping to rear in captivity.

pinto abalone have been released in 21 secret sites in the San Juan Islands. While the news is encouraging, the cost of breeding and raising a cohort of pinto abalone runs about \$12,000 a month, according to state research. Larvae release is being studied as a most cost-effective method, but for now, scientists are sticking to the tried and true.

Ultimately, it's education and awareness that will have to sync in order to save the pinto abalone.

The recovery plan document is frank, stating that the Fish and Wildlife Department and its partners "do not have the financial or staff resources to undertake all facets of the expanding recovery effort."

The department welcomes public comments on the plan at publicinput.com/PintoAbalone.

Learn more about volunteering for the Port Townsend Marine Science at ptmsc.org.



Ali Redman, aquarium curator at the Port Townsend Marine Science Center, shows how endangered juvenile pinto abalone are drawn to the pink hues of crustose coralline algae. The Port Townsend Marine Science Center is currently monitoring 1,500 tiny pintos for out-planting, in hopes that the rare abalone can make a comeback. *Leader photo by Laura Jean Schneider*



An adult pinto abalone explores an aquarium at the Port Townsend Marine Science Center. Pintos are slow growers, and live until they are about 7 years old, feeding mainly on bull kelp. *Photo courtesy of the Port Townsend Marine Science Center*



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Sea Sensations owners Erin Leader and Michael Effler, bonded over boats, and grew their business to include elements of interior design that create welcoming, sea-worthy spaces. *Photos courtesy of Sea Sensations*

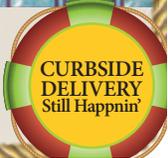
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Laura Jean Schneider
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Michael Effler and his partner Erin Leader met 35 years ago, and they've been creating beauty in boats ever since.

Effler was at the first-ever Wooden Boat Festival in Port Townsend 45 years ago, and worked on traditional wooden boats.

"The character and feel and romance," and "classical lines of traditional boats," were what mesmerized Effler, and soon seduced Leader too.

"She was a speedboat girl," Effler said.

"He got me into wooden boats," Leader agreed.

Together, they are Sea Sensations, a custom design and restoration duo who've worked on traditional sailing and classic motor yachts for the past quarter-century.

"I started at the bottom of the pile," Leader said gleefully, when she went to work for Effler. "My first job was tearing out a rotten cockpit."

The boat she referred to was a renovation they undertook in 1992.

Effler had been on the hunt for a traditional wooden yacht, and the couple found a Hugh Angleman designed auxiliary gaff rigged ketch in California called "Sea Dream."

The yacht had been built in 1969 in Yokohama, Japan by William Harden, and had fallen on some hard times. But the couple saw past the rough exterior, and found the essentials were solid.

"It was a matter of finding good bones," Effler said.

Together, they worked on Sea Dream for four years in Port



Sea Sensations owners Erin Leader and Michael Effler bonded over boats, and grew their business to include elements of interior design that create welcoming, sea-worthy spaces.

Townsend and Bainbridge Island before setting sail again.

When they did make waves, it was in comfort, thanks in part to Effler, who spoke to the masculine slant of many marine environments.

"He hooked me in by making an environment that a woman wouldn't want to be off" of, Leader said, laughing.

Sea Dream has many luxe touches, from marble countertops, to custom stained-glass windows, to a hand-carved head seat.

"We can shut off all the other 'land things' when we're on the boat," Leader said, equating that taking Sea Dream out for

a week is more like "glamping."

And it's easy to do when the living space, however small, is beautifully designed and tastefully decorated, with finishing touches that make it easier for a hesitant companion.

"A certain understanding of comfort and color," Effler added, "is important."

"That's what we bring as a couple to a project."

For instance, they use Marshall Cove marine paints (available through Admiralty Supply in Port Townsend) which can be custom mixed to get the exact color the Sea Sensations couple feel a boat needs.

"They won't look like any other boat out there," Effler said.

Leader added that varied textiles from velvet to sustainable choices like bamboo fabric can make the interior of a boat feel more homey.

She jokingly referred to boats as "the other woman in our man's life," and urged would-be boat buyers and decorators to listen to what the boat says.

Sea Sensations is proud to be a member of the Port Townsend Maritime Trades Association. They joined a year and a half ago, and while they still live on Bainbridge Island, they're at work on several boats on Port Townsend Foundry owner Pete Langley's property. Effler said the couple is looking at moving to Port Townsend.

"There's no substitute for experience," Leader said on aligning with experienced marine tradespeople.

"I'm really glad to be part of it."

For more information, call 206-842-4347; email info@seasensations.com, and visit seasensations.com.

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Bruce Blatchley has been an instructor at the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding since 2004, where he's taught many students the art of contemporary boat building. *Photo courtesy of the Jefferson County Historical Society*

Blatchley

continued from Page 3

years while attending classes at the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding to hone his shipwright skill-set.

"The boat school brought me to Port Townsend from Bellingham," Blatchley said. "I enjoyed the life of a shipwright and I was a lover of rice and beans, because that's all I could afford."

Eventually he chose to leave the Victorian seaport for Bellingham again, cruising away in his 1936 Spitzgatter sailboat.

Blatchley returned to the carpenter trade again in Bellingham, until he received an unexpected phone call that brought him right back

"On one of those blustery nights of 1999, my cell phone rang and the director of the boat school asked me to come in and substitute for a little while," he said.

Blatchley obliged, and what started as a temporary teaching fill-in for a week or so, turned into a career as an instructor.

"It was pretty cool, I was eager," he said of the temporary position.

The school needed a permanent fill, and Blatchley got the job through his work ethic and passion for the working waterfront.

All though he was on-and-off in the instructor role, as he spent time mastering the craft of boatbuilding, Blatchley has been at the school of boat building ever since he took over in the substitute.

"It wasn't until the summer of '06 that I ended up back

at the school and was ready to teach," he said.

That more came after he had completed additional shipwright classes to hone his craft.

Applying his past leadership experience as a mountain guide and his hands-on expertise as a carpenter and shipwright, Blatchley has instructed numerous students to success at the school.

"I'm still being a guide. I'm just not in the mountains anymore," he said.

Blatchley teaches a contemporary boat building program, guiding budding shipwrights on how to construct boats and vessels with wood and epoxy.

"I'm thrilled to be here still," Blatchley exclaimed of his 16 years at the school of wooden boatbuilding. His favorite aspect of teaching is "the gratification, when [his students] produce great work."

Blatchley will be participating in the First Friday Speaker Series, hosted by the Jefferson County Historical Society, where he'll discuss his process of crafting and forming functional art in a tactile manner. The virtual speaker series program will be at 7 p.m. Friday, Nov. 5. The program is sponsored by the Port Townsend Arts Commission and the Northwest Maritime Center.

For tickets, visit www.simpletix.com/e/jchs-first-friday-speaker-series-boatbuild-tickets-80312.

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