

Shipyard marina owners share a love for the ocean



From left, Hingham Shipyard Marinas owners Mark and Jane Hirsh with their nephew, Howard Hirsh, who manages the operation. The new Hewitt's Cove Marina facility is in the background. Photo by Martin Cohn

By Carol Britton Meyer, GateHouse News Service
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Hingham -

From the time Jane Hirsh was a child growing up in Wollaston near the ocean, she loved the water and often dreamed of one day sailing to the Boston Harbor Islands.

Later in life, when she met her future husband, Mark, she helped transform him from a landlubber to an enthusiastic sailor and swimmer who shares her love for the ocean. The first step was taking him out for a sail in her small catamaran on their first date.

“I didn’t marry Jane because of that [adventure] but in spite of it!” Mark joked recently. “She got me home safe. I guess it was a test. I must have passed!”

By the time the opportunity arose in 1995 to purchase the entire 130-acre Hingham Shipyard property as separate parcels, neither Hirsh hesitated, partnering with developer Paul Trendowicz to form SeaChain, LLC. A master plan was developed centering around their shared vision for the site, which included making the waterfront more accessible to the general public and commemorating the Shipyard’s rich history.

“When I drove by the Shipyard as a child, it looked like a kind of secret place,” Jane said with a smile. “Later it lay abandoned and rusting, full of useless things. We wanted to restore it back to an active mixed-use that everyone could enjoy.”

Last summer, SeaChain, which obtained the master permits needed to move the development forward, finalized agreements with three other real estate developers — Samuels & Associates, Inc., Avalon Bay, and Roseland Property Company — which now own separate parcels

within the redevelopment area. The goals of improved public access and preserving the Shipyard’s history remain the same.

SeaChain will continue to operate, making minor improvements to its marina, Tern Harbor, at its current location. The marine service uses are moving to another location across the harbor.

The Hirshs own and operates — with the able assistance of their nephew, Howard, and three of their six children — the Hingham Shipyard Marinas, consisting of Hewitt’s Cove and Landfall. Major improvements have already been made or are in the works for both facilities. Trendowicz owns and operates Tern Harbor Marina.

“We have something special here with the commuter boat and great views,” Mark said.

The Samuels’ portion of the project — a mixed-use “village” on 27.5 acres — includes enhanced waterfront views, a six-screen movie theater, retail stores, restaurants, some residential units, offices, a two-acre waterfront park, outdoor cafes, green space, a health club, day care center, and other amenities. The targeted completion date is Fall 2008.

“The changes that are taking place from day to day are amazing,” observed Howard, who manages the marinas.

The Hirshs are also big on educating children about sailing and the ocean. “Life can’t just be computer games,” Jane said. “There are a lot of opportunities for adventure on the water.”

She and her husband are also members of the National Academy of Science President's Circle, founded by Abraham Lincoln. One of the Academy's roles is to link children to science.

Jane comes from a family with strong ties to the ocean. Her father was in the fishing industry in Boston, processing fish liver oils. "I used to eat fish six times a week," she recalled. "My father was of the opposite school of thought from some people. We got cod liver oil as a reward!"

As a child, Jane was always interested in the Boston Harbor Islands "and how to get to them." As a youngster, she would walk five miles to participate in the Quincy Recreation Department sailing program. "Those were in the days when children weren't driven everywhere," Jane said. "I learned to sail there and eventually my brother and I built a kayak in our basement so we could get to the islands. We didn't understand the center of balance so we couldn't go too far or accomplish our goal, but we later bought a tiny catamaran as a way to get to the islands and to Hull Gut."

On her first trip to Peddocks Island, Jane found newspapers with articles about President Eisenhower strewn on the shore. Peddocks served as barracks during World War I and housed prisoners during World War II. "There's a new pier and a chapel – it's great place to get married," she said.

Her husband considers Peddocks "a wonderful recreational campsite" and notes that Thompson Island was once the site of a school to which Dorchester children were transported by boat. College students complete survival training there now. Long Island houses a homeless shelter. Some 100,000 children and adults visit George's Island a year.

There are nearly endless existing and future possibilities for the Islands, with boats running between them. "Exploring the islands is a great family activity if you don't want to drive, don't have a lot of money, and you want to feel cool in the summertime," Jane said.

The Hirshs' daughter, Nicole, who owns the Union Park Presses Publishing Company, is putting together a guidebook to the Boston Harbor Islands, including resources, schedules, and some of the history behind them.

Reaching out

Over the years during the first permitting process, the Hirshs began reaching out to the community to include adults and children in the waterfront experience. In 1999 and 2000 they brought the Tall Ship H.M.S. Rose to the Harbor and invited Hingham and Hull schoolchildren onboard. "It was raining, and none of the kids brought raincoats, so I went to Building 19 [on Lincoln Street] and bought 20 two-dollar raincoats so they wouldn't get soaked!" recalled Mark with a smile.

Hingham resident Peg Charlton's book about Hingham during World War II inspired him to put together a documentary video on that subject in 2001. Five hundred

people attended a showing of the video in the now-torn-down GSA building. "It was exciting to meet some of the people who worked at the Shipyard," Mark said. "They brought their children and grandchildren. It was an emotional experience." About 10,000 copies of the video were sold and distributed, and it is now part of the Hingham and Hull high school curriculums when students learn about World War II. "It teaches them in a different way how this small, sleepy town turned into a prolific warship facility during World War II," said Samuels Spokesperson Martin Cohn, who has been involved with the video and historic aspects of the project for a number of years.

From there Mark founded the Hingham Shipyard Historical Foundation to commemorate the events that took place at the Shipyard during World War II and the men and women who were instrumental in building and launching Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) during the conflict.

The current Shipyard developers are also committed to commemorating the Shipyard's rich history. "Everyone recognizes the importance of what happened here from 1942 to 1945," Mark said.

The Hirsh family is also looking forward to offering more activities and programs for individuals and families, including ones that will allow more enjoyment of the Boston Harbor Islands.

Gateway to islands

As one of the trustees of the Boston Harbor Islands Alliance — whose wife as a child used to gaze longingly at these same islands in the distance — Mark is pleased that the redeveloped Shipyard will serve as a gateway to these 34 islands. The Alliance is responsible for raising funds for their development for recreational use.

Samuels, Avalon, and Roseland are now overseeing the redevelopment of the site on their separate parcels. The Hirsh family will continue to operate the Hingham Shipyard Marinas with many improvements already completed or in the works.

The new 8,000-square-foot energy-efficient, handicapped-accessible Hewitt's Cove marina facility — complete with a patio and a magnificent view of the water — now under construction will house the main office, leased office and retail space, and will also offer Internet capability, an elevator, and modern restroom and shower facilities.

An updated Landfall facility featuring a maintenance shop, picnic benches, a Laundromat, and restrooms was completed nearly a year ago. Between the two marinas, there are more than 600 moorings and slips. The fuel dock, where marine supplies, snacks, and ice are sold, is also up for a renovation. "These facilities are all new — pristine and state-of-the art," Howard said.

The temporary fenced macadam walkway will eventually be replaced by a waterfront boardwalk to be enjoyed by boaters and visitors.

Hingham Shipyard Marinas will continue to offer bottom painting, shrink wrapping, and waxing. Dockhands are available to rinse off boats.

New marina gates accessible by keypad are being installed at each pier. Cameras will help maintain the security of the boats.

A newly paved lighted marina parking lot is striped for customer convenience, and a roving golf cart shuttle is available to carry boaters and their supplies from the lot to their vessels.

Jane, who loves to fish, also said she would “see what we can do to help out the fishing industry here,” pointing out an area to one side of the site from which fishermen and lobstermen now operate.

“There’s a lot going on down here,” Jane said. “It’s an exciting place.”

In their spare time, Mark and Jane Hirsh enjoy sailing in their catamaran and in their Wellcraft boat, dubbed “Thelma.”

For further information about the Hewitt’s Cove or Landfall marinas, visit www.hinghamshipyardmarinas.com.