



Onward *and* Upward

At Newport Shipyard

BY ANDREA MCHUGH

When Charlie Dana bought Newport Shipyard with a set of partners in the fall of 1998, “diamond in the rough” would be grossly understating its sorry state. True, it was Newport’s oldest and only operating shipyard, it rested on four expansive acres and was perched on the edge of Newport Harbor in the heart of the city, but looking back at the condition of the failing facility when he purchased it from Chapter 11 bankruptcy (the company’s fourth bankruptcy, to be exact), Dana can’t help but laugh.

“I always say in a project that you never take enough ‘before’ pictures. You’re so excited to roll your sleeves up and get something going,” he explains. “There were piles of Black Beauty—that stuff when you sandblast a steel boat. Just piles—mountains—of that all over that place. It was really derelict.” ➤





caption..... PHOTO: BILLY BLACK

The beginning years were rough at best, unprofitable at worst, but Dana knew keeping a working shipyard was important to Newport and the extended sailing community. Rumors swirled that condominium developers had their eye on the covetable address, so he recruited Newport-based businessmen, entrepreneurs and fellow sailors David Ray and the late Don Glassie to invest in the struggling enterprise with him. (The fourth partner was New England Boatworks in Portsmouth.)

The partners started with a business plan scribbled down in a spiral notebook. Page after page spewed strategies on how they would attempt to pull the business out of bankruptcy and eventually, turn the compound into the envy of all New England shipyards. “I look back at that now and we followed it more than I would have thought,” Dana says with a hearty laugh. During that time, monies were flowing out instead of in, the controller had a desk camouflaged under a barrage of bills, and the concept of turning a profit wasn’t even entertained. “We wrote a lot of checks,” he concedes. “It was a difficult period.”

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key to success.

But Dana saw the future: megayachts. Courting these behemoths of the sea would be the key to success. Newport Shipyard would offer the biggest lifts, the cleanest facilities, a full-service yard with refit and repair services, metal fabrication, rigging, a machine shop, a paint shop and an electrical shop, plus crew housing, a restaurant and a mercantile—all surrounded by the most dock space in the city. “I always thought the idea of keeping it a dirty commercial yard next to the Point neighborhood ... it didn’t make sense,” says Dana. He bought out Glassie in an amiable agreement and was going to do the same with Ray, but the restaurateur made an unexpected counter offer. “He said, ‘I want to keep 5 percent,’ and I said ‘Why?’ and he said, ‘Just in case you make it,’” chuckles Dana.

Inch by inch, the shipyard crawled out of bankruptcy within five years, albeit with the assistance of some minor partners. The shipyard also created office space for multiple marine trade businesses, making the campus a one-stop shop for both private and commercial boats as well as the world’s preeminent racing yachts.

Much to Dana's delight, shipyard operations evolved into a family affair. His son Eli joined the Newport Shipyard team in 2003, and though he came onboard with the family name, it was the least of his assets. Eli was quick to prove himself around the docks, studying every detail of every berth, getting to know captains and crews, and eventually learning the intricacies associated with docking multi-million dollar yachts, including the famed *Maltese Falcon*, which at 289-feet, is one of the largest private sailboats in the world. But that kind of confidence doesn't come overnight. It develops day after long day, with every line tossed, every new dock researched and every smooth docking. It comes when, as Eli does often, you're the first one to arrive and the last one to leave. "Eli earned his stripes," says Dana with pride. "When he went in as Dock Master, he doubled the dockage within the first year. He has a natural knack for it."

In 2013, Eli led the charge to buy a 500-ton Marine Travelift to expand the shipyard's haul-out capabilities and enhance boat storage on the hard. With the massive piece of equipment in their repertoire, Newport Shipyard can offer dry-dock service and repairs to the largest vessels,



500 Metric Ton Travelift (37' Clear Inside Width/20' Maximum Draft)

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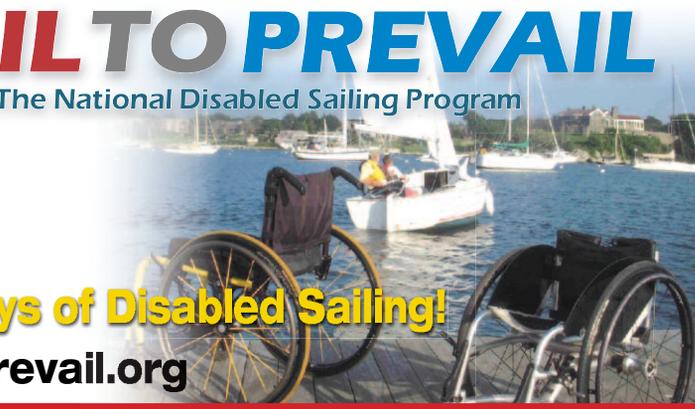
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including superyachts. “It’s the most expensive thing we ever bought,” declares Dana. “We both saw it as the next step. It really was a game changer. We joked at the end of the summer that we had a record year in work—not dockage, but work. [Eli] was really vindicated. It was the right move in many ways and gave us the biggest lift in New England.” The elder Dana encouraged his son to be vested in the enterprise and Eli, now General Manager (though Dana points out, “Once a Dock Master, always a Dock Master”) bought into the business. “Eli has done an amazing job,” he declares. “It’s been such a privilege to work with him over the past decade.”

Dana’s daughter, Isabella Ridall, for which the busy “Belle’s Café” is named, manages the Ship Store and similarly owns a percentage of the business, as does brother Milo. “Isabella got her 100-ton captain’s license, then her husband Andy got bitten by the bug,” says Dana, referencing the growing family’s passion for boats and sailing.

Dana’s son Nick, a familiar face at the shipyard when he’s in port, is currently building on an already impressive sailing resume by crewing in the Volvo Ocean Race (see page 40) with Team



The Dana family. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Charlie and Posy Dana; Andy, Isabella and Charlie Ridall; Nick Dana and Eli, Lauren and Rose Dana.

PHOTOS: BILLY BLACK / AMORY ROSS (NICK)



Alvamedica. Considered the world’s most grueling sailing competition, when the race descends on Newport for the only North American stopover on its 39,000-mile journey May 5-17, 2015, it will be an emotional homecoming for the veteran sailor and his family.

While positive word of mouth among the sailing community was a critical element to the shipyard’s success, one could argue that enviable reputation combined with deep-seated roots and strong brand visibility as contributing factors. The shipyard’s iconic “bird” logo, an evolution from the original American Shipyard logo, offers Newport Shipyard brand recognition worldwide. “We registered ‘Newport Shipyard’ almost immediately, but ‘American Shipyard’ was the entity. There was though, a Newport Shipyard in 1884. Like any business, it drifted around a bit. It was on Thames Street but made its way up to the [current] site,” explains Dana. The bird logo was created by Newport-based graphic designer and

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PHOTO: BILLY BLACK



calligrapher, the late Raphael Boguslav, who also designed the well-known Clarke Cooke House mermaid in Newport in addition to internationally-recognized logos for Keebler and the United States Internal Revenue Service, among others. Today, Dana says “bird watching,” that is, spotting the logo in an exotic or unique locale, is practically a movement, with Newport Shipyard stickers found everywhere from Afghanistan and Abu Dhabi to Japan and of course, Fenway Park. “Everyone on the teams slaps them on places,” explains Dana. “Some are the shenanigans of the sailing community and, more specifically, the friends of my children—and people like it!”

Dana and his team have been exploring destinations outside Newport’s borders to be an extension of the shipyard. “There’s a possibility we might do something in the south in the warm water for our customers. We’ve looked into Charleston and Nassau,” he says. Should the proposed projects come to fruition, Dana and



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PHOTO: BILLY BLACK

company will likely follow a similar ethos to the one they share at Newport Shipyard. “We used say, ‘we want people to feel good here, and they don’t know why.’”

Dana says an exciting if unknown future awaits the shipyard and its possible expansion plans. “What we did was unique at the time and we didn’t have a playbook to follow,” he says, “and it kind of worked.” ★



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