

women in BOATING



SARAH PORTER



LIZ CARNEY (HOLDING TROPHY)



KATE KEEGAN

FROM SALES AND SERVICE TO EDUCATION, women are making a mark on the boating industry.

BY HEATHER STEINBERGER

As the old adage goes, if you choose a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life. So where do you turn if you're passionate about living your life on and around the water? Can you build a career out of boating?

The answer is a resounding yes, and you need only determine what is in your particular wheelhouse. You could market boats, sell them, repair them, teach others how to use and enjoy them — and ultimately, you might even own and operate a marine business yourself.

And remember, despite old stereotypes that refuse to die, the marine industry isn't just for men. This vibrant, rewarding world belongs to women, too.

PART OF A LEGACY

Across the country, women are responsible for marketing and selling boats to consumers. Many times, these women discovered boating in childhood and, in many ways, their careers were destined to unfold this way.

For **Sarah Porter**, the marine industry is in her blood. She is the granddaughter of Vic Porter, industry pioneer and Formula Boats chairman; today, the Decatur, Indiana, native serves as Formula's director of marketing.

"I spent many weekends at Lake Wawasee in Indiana," Porter remembers. "My grandparents had a home on the lake, so we got out on the boat as much as we could. They also had a place in Naples, Florida, so boating and the water have always played big roles in my life."

Porter started working part-time for Formula while she was still in high school, gaining experience in both marketing and sales from age 15 until her graduation from the University of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne. After earning her business degree in 2007, she joined the business full-time.

"My humble beginnings were spent in the mail room shredding papers, and in marketing stuffing envelopes," Porter says. "Now, I'm responsible for writing text for ads, catalogs and press releases; directing video production and editing; creating sales tools; handling social media and website updates; and organizing photo and video shoots, among a lot of other little things."

While Porter acknowledges that the marine industry remains largely male-dominated, she says she sees so many opportunities available to women.

"It's such a fun and rewarding industry,"

she says. "It's refreshing to see more women coming into it and thriving. There are so many ways women can influence this industry, add to it, and help make it better every day. If you have a passion and drive and love for boating, there is a place for you."

Porter says her passion for her work has both professional and deeply personal dimensions.

"I get to see every part of this industry," she explains. "It keeps me on my toes and constantly keeps me striving to show the world how much joy you get out of being on the water with family and friends. Who wouldn't love that?"

"I (also) couldn't be more proud to continue what my grandfather started," she continues. "He set such an amazing example and taught us how far hard work can get you. I can't imagine being anywhere else."

OPENING NEW DOORS

Liz Carney did not come from a boating family. Once the bug bit, however, it bit hard.

Carney grew up in the suburban Detroit community of Berkley, Michigan. When she was a junior in high school, her basketball coach took the team to her

cottage and taught them to waterski; she says it was one of the best days of her life.

"My mom and dad took us to the water every weekend to go swimming, but we were never *on* the water," she says. With a laugh, she channels her teenage self and calls that long-ago day "just the funnest thing ever."

Carney ended up dating the younger brother of that basketball coach, a teen who purchased his own boat at age 16. She later married him.

The water didn't call right away, at least not in a professional sense. Carney went to school to become a certified public accountant, and she and her husband started a family. Then came the shift.

"After my third child, I had an opportunity to work part-time in accounting with a dealer," she says. "When a recession hit and most of our salespeople left, I worked with the customers who would come in."

In the process, Carney learned all about the boats, and before she knew it, she was in sales. She loved it, and in time, she began toying with the idea of opening her own store.

"I was so interested in being an owner because I wanted to see if any of my own ideas would come to fruition," she says. "I had a lot of ideas."

In June 1997, Carney opened the doors to Grand Bay Marine in Traverse City, Michigan. Three years later, she was able to open a Charlevoix location. The business is one of Regal Boats' top dealers, it's a market leader in retail boat sales, and it employs approximately 30 to 35 people, with additional part-timers in the summer.

After more than 20 years at the helm, Carney says she still loves the business.

"I love the happiness that boating brings," she says. "I want to be part of something that changes women's lives. So many of them thank me for helping them become boaters. That's important, because time is so precious, and boating is one of the few truly versatile, accessible things you can do as a family. There's something for everyone."

ON THE SALES FLOOR

Like Carney, **Kate Keegan** was not a boater as a child, but she did grow up near the water. She hails from Morris, Illinois, a city on the Illinois River, part of the Great Loop, and a huge draw for heartland boaters and watersports enthusiasts.

"I was introduced to boating through

family friends," Keegan says. "Friends of ours owned Spring Brook Marina (in Seneca, just 17 miles downriver)."

Keegan majored in hospitality at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. Hoping to find positions that would connect her with outdoor recreation, she followed her career path from Florida to California.

Then she started thinking about the marine industry, and about Spring Brook Marina, which is just 10 minutes away from her family home. In November 2017, she took a leap of faith, moving back to the Midwest and launching her career in boat sales.

"On my second day, I learned to drive a Prestige — in November!" Keegan recalls, chuckling. "I wanted to learn to handle all the sea trials and orientations, not just read from the manuals. Now I can cover it all, from handshake to signing."

And she means what she says. Keegan can indeed cover it all, from stem to stern; she has even earned a Volvo certification.

"I'm that type of learner," she says. "I'm super hands-on. To connect with the customer, I have to be able to explain all the ins and outs."

Keegan also organizes events for the

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KAITLYN SCHNEIDER

dealership, including last year’s Prestige owners rendezvous, a multiple-day trip to Grand Haven, Michigan, from Chicago. The popular summer cruising event drew 22 boats.

“That was pretty fun,” she says. “I really love it here. Because it’s family owned, I get to do a lot of things, and I can share my ideas. It doesn’t feel like a job to me.”

Keegan also notes that she feels a real sense of camaraderie with women, so she enjoys having opportunities to walk through the boats with them and help them feel comfortable.

“I want to make it fun for them and help them feel the excitement,” she says.

For her, it’s all about empowerment — not just for the women who will own the boats, but also for those who might be interested in boating careers.

“I wasn’t a boater, but I learned to love it,” Keegan says. “If you’re already a boater, you’re a step ahead of everyone else. It’s so important to be passionate. And if you’re worried about this being a male-dominated business, remember that’s nothing to be afraid of.”

After a pause, she adds wryly, “I played volleyball in college, so I’m pretty confident. If you don’t know something, you can learn. I did.”

IN THE REPAIR SHOP

Fellow Wisconsinite **Kaitlyn Schneider** also has found her calling at a boat dealership, but she’s not in the front of the house. Schneider, who hails from Appleton, works as a boat mechanic at Lakeside Marina in Oshkosh.

Schneider did grow up on boats. Her family owned a 35-foot Baja cruiser, and throughout her childhood, they spent weekends in Wisconsin’s Door County, using Sturgeon Bay as their regular home base.

She discovered an aptitude for mechanics early on, helping her dad work on cars and excelling in her high school’s auto mechanics courses. Her love of boats and eagerness to learn new things led her to the Universal Technical Institute’s boat program, and then on to the Marine Mechanics Institute (MMI) in Orlando, Florida.

“I was usually the only girl in my high school classes, or maybe one of two,” Schneider recalls. “I liked that. It gave me the motivation to do it more.”

Schneider graduated from high school in June 2013, started at MMI in August, and graduated from its program a year later. Although she was looking for jobs in Florida, she decided to share her resume on a visit home — and she got an offer.

She started work at Lakeside Marina in September 2014. She works on boats that range from 16-foot aluminum fishing craft to 35-foot cruisers, and she holds certifications for MerCruiser engines and Mercury outboards. According to owner Joe Honsa, she is a fantastic boat mechanic.

Schneider says she loves what she does, whether that involves accessing a difficult engine compartment, hooking up the tractor to launch a boat at the ramp, or going on a delivery.

“The deliveries are super fun,” she says. “It’s great to play with the new motors and see how fast they can go.”

Spring involves a deluge of work orders, checking fluids and electricals, and making sure the boats are performing correctly. Summer is all about fixing broken props, drives and fuel pumps; it also involves what Schneider calls “the game of diagnostics,” from engine and electrical issues to oil lines coming off. When fall arrives, she changes oil, winterizes water systems and engines, and handles shrinkwrapping.

One thing is certain: The life of a boat mechanic is never dull.

“Working on boats was an easy decision for me,” Schneider says. “During the season, I might get five boat rides a day. I’m in the sun, outside all the time... it’s awesome.”

ABOARD A FLOATING CLASSROOM

If you spend enough time with folks in the boating business, you’ll hear “fun” a lot. You’ll also hear “empowerment,” especially when it comes to women in boating. And two women in particular have dedicated their lives to making sure women not only have fun on their boats, but are also empowered to handle those boats themselves.

Patti Moore and **Carol Cuddyer** own and operate Sea Sense, based in St. Petersburg, Florida. Founded in 1990, this



PATTI MOORE (LEFT)

boating school offers hands-on sailing and powerboating courses, private instruction, teaching deliveries and much more.

Moore grew up in central Georgia. Like Carney and Keegan, she was not part of a boating family; she didn’t set foot on a boat until her mid-20s.

“A friend built a sailboat on Lake Lanier, outside Atlanta,” she recalls. “He asked me if I wanted to go sailing. I think my response was, ‘What’s that?’”

Moore later married a sailor. The couple moved to Florida, built a 39-foot sailboat and moved aboard. She earned her captain’s license and started doing boat deliveries and charters.

“The more I learned, the more I wanted to share the knowledge that I learned the hard way — particularly with other women,” Moore says. “I taught for different sailing schools, and that’s how I met Carol.”

Cuddyer has been a boater all her life, starting at age three on New Hampshire’s Lake Winnepesaukee. She married a charter fisherman, and together they sailed Northeastern cruising grounds such as Long Island Sound and Block Island.

“My husband convinced me to get my captain’s license,” the former ER nurse remembers. “He said, ‘You know everything anyway.’ I took my test in New York City and wondered what I could do with this; I didn’t know any women captains. In the 1980s, women were either making

sandwiches or holding on for dear life. I felt it was important to change that.”

Then her path crossed with Moore’s.

“I talked her into working a charter with me here in Florida, and we talked about a school,” Moore says. “She wanted to have one in New England in the summer. I lived in Florida — perfect for winter sailing! We both had powerboating experience and wanted to teach that as well. That’s how Sea Sense began.”

The school had an 85 percent sail, 15 percent power ratio in 1990, but those numbers have reversed in the last three decades. And although Sea Sense started out teaching women, most of its customers today are couples who want to go cruising together — especially the Great Loop.

“The sail-power ratio has changed to 85 percent power, 15 percent sail, and we’re definitely seeing more couples,” Cuddyer confirms. “The Boomers are retiring, and we’re helping them work together. You need two people who are qualified to do everything onboard. That’s for safety reasons. It’s also empowering, and it should be fun.”

That still means engaging women, and Moore says that is essential for their sense of accomplishment, their feeling of competence and their safety. “All three increase the amount of fun they have,” she observes, “and it’s the woman’s boat too.”

Cuddyer adds, “More women are buying their own boats now, and convincing their husbands to go!”



CAROL CUDDYER

Sea Sense can teach private courses aboard the owners’ own boat or charter one for private instruction. If owners find the boat of their dreams at the Fort Lauderdale or Miami boat show, instructors also can do a teaching delivery en route to the new home port. Along the way, they are changing lives.

“Lots of former students call us when they’ve done something fabulous, which is so cool,” Cuddyer says. “Being a positive influence in people’s lives, going places I never thought I’d go — I just love what I do.”

“My love for sharing my knowledge and experience on boats is still strong, and we’ve been privileged to meet the most wonderful people over the years,” Moore reflects. “I don’t think I’ll ever lose my love of teaching boating.”

A PERFECT FIT

Whether they’re in the company headquarters, on the sales floor, in the service department or out on the water, women are a perfect fit for today’s boating industry, according to Liz Carney.

“We’re compassionate, we’re multitaskers, and we know how to connect with people and give them a great experience,” she says. “We have a lot of women in the business now, but of course there’s more opportunity. And more room to grow.”

“There are a lot of perks,” Kaitlyn Schneider adds. “It’s just more fun working on boats.” ★