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St. Clair Shores man's career has grown with yacht business he runs

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BY KIM NORTH SHINE
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Each time Steve Rybicki -- usually fashionably dressed and clearly in authority -- takes a pre-cruise tour of the luxury yachts he manages, he takes a tour of his own career.

In his career, he's done nearly every job and worn nearly every uniform on the boat.

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Rybicki, general manager and vice president of Infinity and Ovation Yacht Charters of St. Clair Shores, is an example of the work-your-way-up-the-ladder kind of career that isn't as common as it once was.

Last week, before passenger boarding of the Infinity and the Ovation -- the massive, multimillion-dollar yachts -- to leave port from the Jefferson Beach Marina in St. Clair Shores, Rybicki passed through the multilevel, luxurious vessels, as he regularly does.

His workweeks are 60-70 hours. He's single, so it's easier to commit so much to the job.

"A lot of times, I'll ride the charters. ...You put an eight- or nine-hour day in the office. Then you're out on the water for three to

five hours, but it's something I really enjoy."

As he cruised through the finely decorated and bustling vessels last week, he kept a serious eye on details while giving a friendly greeting to employees, many of them working jobs that Rybicki once did.

"We don't hire based on experience," he said. "We hire based on personality. That's why we hear how much our guests enjoy our staff."

Hiring is just one of the ways Rybicki, 31 and a St. Clair Shores resident, has made his mark on the business that he's been a part of since age 15.

"I've worked every position except captain," he said.

Dishwasher, waitstaff, bartender, cook, crew, first mate.

He owes his career -- or at least the dishwasher's job that led to his love for the Infinity and his vision for what it could be -- to his mother, Sara Rybicki of Grosse Pointe Woods.

When her son was 15, she asked the then-owner of the Infinity, whose wife's baby she had delivered on her job as a nurse, about employment for her child.

"She said, 'My son needs a job.' He said, 'Oh, we need a dishwasher,'" Steve Rybicki said.

In those days, the boat was not so luxurious. Passengers were ferried regularly, but little time was put into maintaining the boat's appearances or changing the business plan to keep up with the times, Rybicki said.

PHOTOS

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(Photos by ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press)

Steve Rybicki greets clients Tom Michalski, left, and Nancy Nicholson of Tyco Electronics at the Jefferson Beach Marina in St. Clair Shores.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To charter

For information about Infinity and Ovation Yacht Charters, go to www.infinityandovation.comcq-jarmstrong or call 586-778-7030.

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In 1999, a company called Continental Dining Services Inc. in Sterling Heights bought the Infinity, then the only boat that was part of the company.

Rybicki, who, at the time, was a first mate and a business student at Wayne State University, was promoted to sales and marketing and, six months later, was named general manager.

"I saw there was potential. ... I had learned you have to reinvent yourself," he said. "Knowing this is the Great Lakes state, there are great times to be had on the water."

Two years later, he graduated, and the company started its turnaround.

One of the first orders of business was fixing up and modernizing the Infinity.

"It was looking pretty poor. ... I didn't know what was going to happen to it when I graduated and got a real job," Rybicki said.

Now, 16 years since his mom played job placement specialist, he has seen a total turnaround of the company.

But the transformation of the business didn't become truly apparent until 2005, when a brand-new 138-foot, tri-level yacht, the Ovation, was added, giving the company the ability to host parties of up to 300 people. It features what Rybicki calls a metropolitan decor with dark cherry wood, grays, blacks, stone and brushed chrome.

"We tapped into a whole new market with the Ovation," he said.

Earlier this year, a renovated, redecorated Infinity was unveiled. At 117 feet, it was 27 feet longer than before and more contemporary with its Ralph Lauren look, featuring bamboo floors, lighter cherry wood and lots of brushed chrome. It can carry up to 150 guests.

Typical dinner boats they are not.

The company has 10 full-time employees, and 85 seasonal employees who are part-time or full-time. The season runs from May to October.

Last year, the yachts hosted about 30,000 guests at hundreds of events from weddings and milestone birthdays to swanky corporate events and fund-raisers.

The boats go out from the Jefferson Beach Marina and the General Motors dock behind the Renaissance Center in Detroit nearly every day, often twice a day, for three- to five-hour cruises.

"We've seen a huge increase in business downtown," Rybicki said.

Last year, there were 12 charters from downtown. This year, there have been 30. The number of passengers also is up this year.

Cruises start at \$65 to \$100 per person and include food and entertainment.

Together, the boats are worth \$10 million, Rybicki said.

"I never dreamed we'd be where we are so fast," he said.

He says this as two charter buses have arrived on dock at the Jefferson Marina. Employees are preparing gorgeous food tables, bartenders ready the drinks, and smells from the kitchen fill the boat in preparation for the next two charters: Mercedes-Benz on one yacht, Tyco Electronics on the other.

Before they board, Rybicki will tour the floors with his executive staff to make sure everything looks good and that the cruise will run smoothly.

As the minutes to boarding count down, the energy on the boat amps up.

The captains are taking their helms. Bartenders are filling water glasses and lining them up on the bar. Wine is being uncorked. Aromatic food is coming out faster, being placed on picturesque tables.

It won't slow down until the cruise is over. The cruise from St. Clair Shores will follow the Lake St. Clair shoreline past the Pointes and down the Detroit River to the Ambassador Bridge and then come back.

Even before Rybicki entertained the idea of staying on with the company, he rooted for the yachts to succeed, and now he has found his own success in a career he says he loves.

"I consider it more of a lifestyle than a job," said Rybicki. "So many people cannot say they get up and enjoy going to work every day. And I absolutely enjoy it."

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